

# S&W 500 UNLEASHED IN A RIFLE

# OUTDOOR LIFE

SEPTEMBER 2015

THIS  
192-INCH  
GIANT IS OUR  
DEER OF  
THE YEAR!  
P. 46

## AMERICA'S TOP BUCKS

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(AND TACTICS) BEHIND  
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Good friends and their dogs converge on the author's range to camp and hunt birds under eastern Montana's big sky.

BY ANDREW MCKEAN

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For many anglers, catching a huge shark represents the ultimate big-game fishing adventure—until everything goes terribly wrong. BY JAMES HALL

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COVER STORY  
DEER OF  
THE YEAR

Nothing beats a big buck story. That's why we're bringing you the tales of 26 incredible bucks for our annual celebration of your best deer.

BY THE EDITORS



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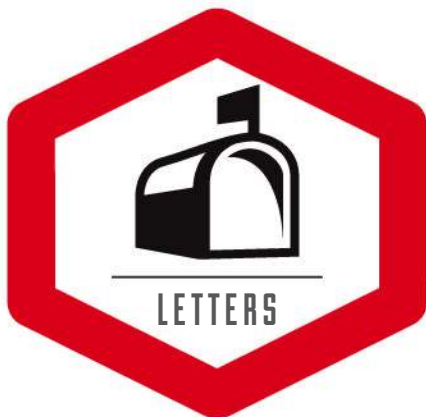
**Duck Commander** / Shamrock, OK / 12:22 p.m.

Every kid's first year afield is a special one. At the age of 9, Madyson Osborne got to tag along with her dad and his buddies to the duck pond.

"She's always been a daddy's girl," says Tony Osborne. "So anything I do, she's by my side."

After breakfast in the blind (eggs and bacon fried over a propane stove), Madyson used the calls slung around her neck to coax in a few birds. This camo-smearing smile appeared when the party shot its limit and called it a day.





### BLACKLISTED

► I laughed out loud when I saw the cover of your June/July issue ["The Gun Test"]. It's about as silly as a picture of a SWAT team member in full regalia holding a Winchester Model '94. Are there not enough black-gun ads in your magazine that you still feel the need to hawk them on the front cover? Isn't the pendulum swinging fast enough for you boys?

*JW Bookout  
Hartley, TX*

### COVER MODEL JERON WESEN OF GLASGOW, MONTANA, REPLIES:

► That photo was taken in early March—calving season—and because I had come to the *Outdoor Life* Gun and Optics Test direct from checking my 2-year-old heifers, I didn't have time to don my black ops garb. I'll carry a Model '94 when it lets me ring steel out to 1,000 yards, like I do most weekends with my ARs—while wearing that same hat you saw on the cover.

### CAN'T GET ENOUGH OF THE GUN TEST?

Go to [OutdoorLife.com/test2015](http://OutdoorLife.com/test2015) to find photos, videos, and exclusive behind-the-scenes details from the Gun and Optics Test.

### REAL TALK

► I'm a recent subscriber, and I appreciate your honest product reviews, especially considering that everything marketed to sportsmen isn't perfect. I liked the test of the Nosler M48 Patriot [Shooting, August 2015]. But do we really need another 7mm mag, especially if it's only marginally faster than existing cartridges? Also, are you kidding me with an \$1,800 rifle that can barely shoot 2-inch groups at 100 yards? Go buy

any of the new value-priced rifles for about \$500 in 7mm Rem. Mag.—they can all perform better. Keep telling it like it is.

*Gregory Pasiuk  
Placerville, CA*

### GEOGRAPHY LESSON

► In your June/July issue, you had a really great article about hunting blacktail deer ["Left-Coast Bucks," Hunting]. But you also referenced the Pacific Northwest. Why? We never see you guys write about the Atlantic Northeast. You think us Westerners don't know where we hunt, or what?

*Tom Blackwell  
Salinas, CA*

### BOW BROTHERS

► The story about Andrew McKean's fiberglass recurve [Editor's Journal, August 2015] was a blast from the past. My father bought me my bow when I was 9. McKean shot a possum with his cedar arrows; I picked off rats at the local dump. Our bows look the same, but mine still has the original string. Thanks for bringing back fond memories.

*John Finui  
Carrolltown, PA*

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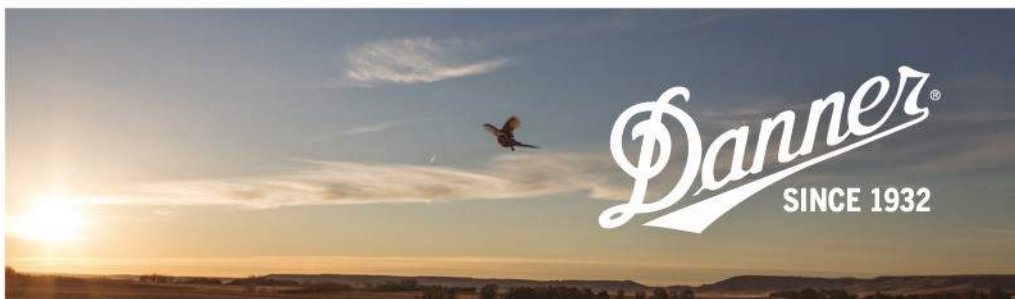
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**THE LIFE**  
EDITOR'S JOURNAL

# Dream Bucks

BIG-DEER STORIES ARE ABOUT PLACE, PLANNING, AND SECRECY

**R**umors of big bucks are as unreliable and as perishable as deer-camp mayonnaise. Even when we hear about the sighting of a monster buck from a hunting

buddy or a rural-route driver, the “news” tends to be suspect. How big? How long ago? Where? The details get thinner and less certain the more we inquire. The reason is as old as the law of supply and demand. The scarcer the commodity—in this case, whopper bucks—the higher the interest, and, consequently, the more precious the information about it.

A big buck isn't a commodity, of course. For the hunters who encounter one, it's more like a yardstick. Every other buck will be measured against that giant. Every other hunting experience will be compared to that moment of anxiety and euphoria that hangs like fairy dust around encounters with exceptional animals.

This issue's cover story is all about the confluence of remarkable time with special place. Our “Deer of the Year” feature, which starts on p. 46, tells the amazing stories of the improbable and the wild rumors that came true for readers in the right place, at the right time.

What I love about our annual “Deer of the Year” feature—now in its 19th year—is the everydayness of the hunters contrasted with their extraordinary experiences. These guys and gals could be any of us who follow our hunches and make the shot when it counts.

Take Ben Zuern, the Wisconsin hunter who tagged that beautiful buck on our cover. His story is familiar to any of us with limited time and real estate to hunt. What makes his experience noteworthy—besides



the deep family connection to the land he hunted—is the long odds that he tilted in his favor through careful preparation and deliberate execution of his hunting plan. And his commitment to keeping news of that buck as quiet as he could.

But big-buck rumors run on legs of their own.

Online content editor Alex Robinson, who recently relocated to Minnesota, drove to Wisconsin to interview Zuern for our feature. Robinson, who grew up in the area, had heard from his mother about Zuern's monster buck when it was still roaming the woods—despite Zuern's every effort at concealment.

As he followed directions to Zuern's farm, Robinson recognized the place. He had hunted rabbits on an adjacent property as a high-schooler. Then, like any good deer hunter, Robinson calculated the impossibly long odds that it could have been him holding that outside rack.

*Andrew McKean*

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# THE ARCHERY EDUCATOR

HEATHER PFEIL FIRST PICKED UP A RECURVE AT THE AGE OF 8. HER HOBBY HAS SINCE MORPHED INTO A FULL-BLOWN COMPETITIVE AND COACHING CAREER. NOW SHE'S INTRODUCING NEW SHOOTERS TO THE SPORT **BY NATALIE KREBS**

Pfeil strikes a balance between coaching others and shooting for herself.



## ROLL CALL

Know someone who would make a good candidate for My OL? Send an email to [myol@outdoorlife.com](mailto:myol@outdoorlife.com)

**OUTDOOR LIFE:** You're the program coordinator for Lancaster Archery Academy. How did you end up there?

**HEATHER PFEIL:** I grew up immersed in archery. My dad is a hunter and he took me to this beautiful range where all these kids were shooting. I nagged him for weeks to take me back. I ultimately shot Olympic-style recurve for a decade and trained at the Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista, Calif. I've competed in the national compound and 3-D divisions for 10 years, and I've got my Level 3 coaching certification from USA Archery. I moved to Pennsylvania in 2013 to start the Academy's program from the ground up.

**OL:** There are lots of archery programs. How is yours unique?

**HP:** Coach-student interaction. We have dedicated instructors with unparalleled experience. We teach all ages, and we believe anybody can shoot. Our goal is to grow the sport and show newcomers how much fun it is. In two years, we've introduced 5,000 people to archery.

**OL:** What's the biggest mistake beginners make?

**HP:** Not understanding how much focus goes into a good shot. They say archery is 90 percent mental and 10 percent physical. It requires more visualization than you realize.

**OL:** So how do you achieve that?

**HP:** We have several drills, but we'll try exercises beyond target practice. Some try yoga. Or I'll ask others to visualize themselves shooting a perfect bull's-eye. Everyone knows what a bad shot feels like. But can they envision a good shot?

**OL:** What's next for you?

**HP:** I'd like to continue expanding my knowledge. Archery is an ever-growing sport, so learning something new every day or week is my goal. The more I know, the more I can pass on to my students. I'd like to compete in more tournaments and shoot more. It gives any instructor an edge when they're both an athlete and a coach.

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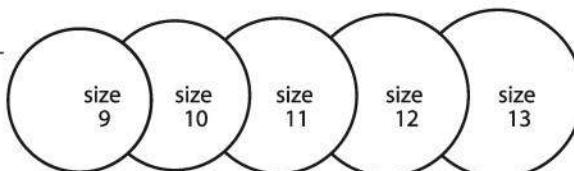
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# THERE'S ALWAYS NEXT TIME

AN ODYSSEY FOR AN ELK PROVES FRUITLESS—FOR NOW BY DEADEYE MCGURK

spotted a story in the paper yesterday. A 12-year-old kid shot his first elk, a 6x6 bull. Now, I'm all for young folks hunting, but a royal bull his first time afield? I've been chasing elk for more than 25 years and haven't shot anything so magnificent.

I still remember the first elk I ever saw. It was half a mile away, plowing through snow up to its belly on the other side of the drainage. What a creature! I thought if I held high on his ears, perhaps the crosswind would bring my bullet to his chest. But I wasn't confident I could hit him squarely at that distance. Plus, I'd have to push through feet of snow to drag him out.

So I let him go.

Everyone said, "You have to shoot!"

I resolved to fire next time.

Next time I tracked a little herd that I suspected had a bull in its midst. Finally, after much effort, I reached the spot where I figured they'd be bedding. I looked through my binocular in the hopes of glimpsing antlers above the brush and grass. There he was, looking at me. I dropped my bino in the snow and raised my gun just as he slipped behind a tree. He was a long spike, but I sure wanted him.

I held just ahead of the tree, waiting and waiting for him to move. But he just held and held. Finally, I shifted my gun, and there he went. I got the scope on him just in time, but it was dialed up to 9 and all I saw was hide. I held fire.

Everyone said, "You have to shoot!"

So, I resolved to shoot next time.

Next time I tracked another little group up the hill, but when I reached their bedding area it was empty. They had seen me coming. I turned around and headed back. Next thing I knew, here came the herd down the hill, 50 yards to my left. A big royal bull led the pack. But they darted in and out of the trees, and I didn't think I had a clear shot. I held fire.

Everyone said, "You have to shoot!"

So, I resolved to shoot next time.

Next time I was hiking up a mountain with a little group of deer running ahead of me. I was afraid they would spook the elk. There was nothing to do but keep going. Suddenly I saw a back end that sure looked like it belonged to a granddaddy bull. But I wasn't keen on shooting from behind. Those big horns thrashed across his rump, his hind legs squatted, and he leapt out of sight.

Everyone said, "You have to shoot!"

So, I resolved to shoot next time.

Next time we were running a ridge when we spotted a good bull on a hillside about 500 yards away. We figured we should get closer. We had just shouldered our packs when the crack of a rifle sounded. *Bangity-bang*, and the bull fell down.

Someone was already closer.

Everyone said, "You have to shoot!"

So, I resolved to pull the trigger next time.

But now I'm getting so old, I don't want to climb that high anymore. So I doubt there will be a next time. That 12-year-old sure looked happy, but I enjoyed every footstep out there, I guess. And if I did get a big one, I probably would've forgotten to take his picture for the paper anyway.

Next time...I'll shoot.



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Humans' binocular vision is called stereopsis. Two widely spaced eyeballs allow us to scan our periphery, but our eyes are close enough together to double the resolution of objects in our gaze. Two eyes enable us to judge distance and to see the depth of objects. Stereoptic vision also helps us keep our balance. So it's no wonder that the tool best configured to help modern hunters navigate and understand our world is modeled after our own anatomy.

Binoculars are versatile generalists, designed to magnify distant objects while providing a generous field of view, and delivering a bright, crisp image in a durable, portable package. Submissions to this year's optics test do those jobs simply and well, without the laser rangefinders and integral reticles that have crept into the category in recent years.

Our field is divided into two groups: Full-size binos, which have objective lenses measuring 33mm or larger, and mid-size binos, with objectives measuring 32mm or smaller.



### BUSHNELL LEGEND M SERIES 8X42

**SCORE: 81.9 PRICE: \$379**

► Bushnell's redesigned and realigned Legend occupies the performance and price space between the Elite and the Trophy lines, and is further subdivided into Legend E, L, and M series. Confused? All you need to know is that the M-Series Legend represents one hell of a buy.

The Bushnell scored near the top in most of our categories, but it really stood out in two: value (the basis for our Great Buy award) and image quality, which is the subjective measure of how well an optic sees. Drilling into its attributes, the team loved its ergonomics and its lens coatings, which seemed to coax additional light and color out of every image.



### BRESSER H.S. SOL 10X42

**SCORE: 67.5 PRICE: \$350**

► Externally, Bresser's Stuff of Legend is striking. Flashy metallic accents and nicely textured controls add just the right amount of bling to what are usually generic black tubes. However, the styling doesn't disguise the generally poor optics of this binocular.

On both measurable and subjective evaluations, the Bresser disappointed, which is surprising given its extra-low-dispersion glass and otherwise solid construction. One reason for the poor optical performance may be uncoated internal surfaces and lenses that appear to be stopped-down with an internal washer, a device that prevents the full amount of light from entering the optic.



### CABELA'S INSTINCT EURO HD 15X56

**SCORE: 82.4 PRICE: \$1,599**

► This super-size optic packs a ton of very good glass into a very large chassis. It's so large, in fact, that a tripod is required for it to reach its fullest—albeit limited—utility as a high-mag panning optic. That both-eyes-open capability makes this configuration a darling of Coues deer hunters or anyone who spends hours at a time behind his binocular.

The Euro HD has bright, crisp lenses that make long glassing sessions comfortable and productive. As you might expect given its 56mm objectives, it won our low-light test. It also received high marks for its image and durability, and rated as a top value—we felt it measured up to binos that cost \$1,000 more.



### MAVEN B1 10X42

**SCORE: 79.2 PRICE: \$1,100**

► This is a very good binocular, but what's most interesting about it isn't the image it delivers; it's the furniture around the glass.

The Maven is the world's first entirely customizable binocular, and through Maven's website we were able to "design" the bino you see here à la carte, including the Kuui Vias camouflage chassis, the silver focus wheel and objective lens rings, and even the engraved ocular lens ring (ours says "Outdoor Life Optics Test '15"). The base price for the B1 is \$900; the price as pictured is \$1,100.

On top of all that customization, the Maven B1 features first-rate Japanese glass, precise focus control, and a solid center hinge.



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\*Based on 10-shot average comparison of Black Cloud® FWB142 2 and leading performance waterfowl loads; pattern efficiency reflects percentage of total pellet count in a 30-inch circle at 40 yards.



LEICA ULTRAVID  
HD-PLUS 10X42

SCORE: 88.3 PRICE: \$2,499

## WE WEREN'T SURE LEICA'S

flagship binocular could get any better, but the venerable Ultravid HD's updates make it one of the world's best sporting optics.

Cosmetically, there's not much difference between the Ultravid HD and the new HD-Plus. But Leica has invested in a new formulation for the glass used to make its roof prisms, and that, along with a new external lens coating, improves both light transmission and contrast. We noticed the difference not only on the resolution range, but also in our subjective evaluation of the image delivered by the bino.

"It's like the light jumps into this binocular," said one tester, and another noted the rich, velvety blacks on our black-and-white resolution target. The company claims the updates boost optical brightness by 5 percent over previous versions of the Ultravid. While we weren't able to confirm that, the Leica dominated our resolution test—scoring a perfect 10—and turned in the best score on image quality, which is our subjective determination of optical performance.

The Ultravid's assets aren't limited to its glass. We liked its lustrous black finish, fast-focus control, center-dial diopter adjustment, relatively compact design, and the strength and durability of its over-built hinge.

While the Ultravid HD-Plus is by no means inexpensive, we felt that the price was in line with its impressive performance and with other elite optics of its class.





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### MEOPTA MEOSTAR B1 HD 12X58

**SCORE: 86.5 PRICE: \$1,399**

► This is the latest iteration of a very good and useful line of European-made optics. The MeoStar B1 HD's other configurations are 42mm and 56mm, so it was just a matter of time before this 50mm offering came along.

The 12X is very bright and crisp. It's a little heavy and powerful for hand-held glassing, but mounted on a tripod, it's a great open-country optic, and it also gets my vote for a first-rate pickup binocular. The Meopta was second only to the 56mm Cabela's in our low-light test, and our panel loved the in-hand heft and balance of the 38-ounce optic.



### MINOX BL HD 10X44

**SCORE: 77.2 PRICE: \$499**

► This German-made binocular may be one of the great bargains of the year. It features excellent dual-hinge construction, tight and precise focus and diopter controls, and a lustrous finish.

But the optics inside the stylish package don't quite live up to the outer appearance. The BL HD scored below the average on our low-light and resolution tests, and testers complained about its stingy eye relief and boxy eyecups.

Still, there's a ton of value in this tight, durable, good-looking optic that will retail for less than \$500, especially considering that it's built in Germany, the motherland of sports optics.



### STEINER WILDLIFE XP 8X44

**SCORE: 75.2 PRICE: \$1,999**

► Like the Minox, the Steiner sports 44mm objective lenses, a slight upsell from the 42mm objectives that dominate the American market. This gives the binocular just a little edge in low-light brightness and optical resolution.

That configuration, along with remarkable close focus and a wonderful field of view, is engineered for the birding community, but it also makes this a great hunting binocular. We liked the easy-to-grip open-hinge design and the dual diopter controls, but not all testers favored the rounded European styling or the slick armor. Optically, the Steiner is a solid, well-coated instrument.



### VANGUARD ENDEAVOR ED II 8X42

**SCORE: 75.7 PRICE: \$499**

► Partly because we root for underdogs, and partly because this binocular won a major award in the birding world, we were pumped to test this newest offering in Vanguard's priced-right Endeavor line.

We appreciated its big, easy-viewing ocular lenses, oversize and precise focus wheel, and locking diopter control; but we were disappointed that the Japanese ED glass didn't turn in better optical scores. The Vanguard was near the lower end of our resolution and low-light tests. Still, this is a durable, fairly priced optic that features good coatings, better controls, and lovely ergonomics.



### VORTEX CROSSFIRE 8X42

**SCORE: 75.1 PRICE: \$159**

► While there's nothing particularly new about this 8X offering from Vortex, there's also nothing to distract from its chief asset, which is its accessible price.

If that seems faint praise, consider that the Crossfire turned in better resolution scores than binoculars costing 10 times as much. However, closer inspection reveals some internal surfaces that appear to be uncoated, a diopter wheel without reference marks, and armor that is too slick.

Those may be small quibbles for a hunter in the market for a serviceable entry-level roof prism. For that buyer, the Crossfire offers huge value.



### ZEISS VICTORY SF 10X42

**SCORE: 87.2 PRICE: \$2,650**

► This Victory SF's image is so big and bright and lush that it seems somehow larger than the 10X instrument that delivers it. Its back-heavy balance tips it toward the face, giving it a spring-to-action feel and allowing for more comfortable glassing. That attribute is enabled by a new optical system featuring field-flattening ocular lenses that account for its big "picture-window" image and an immense field of view.

Its flat-gray armor is tasteful and modern, and its triple-hinge construction should make it strong and durable. The fast-focus control is precise and quick and does not stray.





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### SIG SAUER ZULU 3 10X32

**SCORE: 76.6 PRICE: \$270**

► If the glass inside this stylish binocular had been as sharp as its exterior design, we might have given it our Editor's Choice award; however, the Zulu 3's performance disappointed. It turned in good resolution scores—probably because of its 10X configuration—but then bombed the low-light test (a 10X will deliver a smaller exit pupil than a similarly configured 8X), and our panel noted poor image rendition and significant edge distortion.

The Zulu 3 conforms to Sig's tactical branding. The armor is designed to deflect light and makes the bino look as martial as its name.



### STEINER XC 8X32

**SCORE: 76.2 PRICE: \$459**

► Steiner describes this bombproof binocular as a travel optic, but we found plenty of reasons to tuck it into a turkey vest or tote it to a tree-stand close to home. The wonderfully grippy armor seemed to stick to our hands, and we liked the balance of the 21-ounce optic. We also gave high grades to its precise focus wheel and left-barrel diopter control.

However, the XC disappointed on our two objective metrics (resolution and low-light performance), and we felt the binocular was priced out of range for many entry-level hunters, who might seek an optic of this configuration.



### VANGUARD ENDEAVOR ED 8X32

**SCORE: 77.9 PRICE: \$299**

► This little brother to Vanguard's well-regarded full-size Endeavor features the same extra-low-dispersion glass, open-bridge design, oversize focus wheel, locking diopter control, and tacky textured armor. A new optical design enabled the 8x32 to produce one of the best close-focus scores in our test, and it turned in very good resolution and low-light scores.

It lagged behind other entries on value and mechanical considerations (testers cited its spongy focus and flimsy eyecups). But if you're looking for a good all-around mid-size bino, consider this Endeavor.



### ZEISS TERRA ED 8X32

**SCORE: 71.4 PRICE: \$411**

► Maybe Zeiss hopes its reputation as an elite brand will distract buyers of this Asian-made binocular from the disappointing optics inside its stylish chassis.

The Terra turned in the lowest resolution and low-light scores of the 8Xs in our test, and our sample demonstrated significant edge distortion. We also dinged the Terra ED for its flimsy feel and spongy focus.

We did like its distinctive style and its amenities—the Terra ships with a first-rate Under Armour harness. But the accessories don't compensate for the underwhelming optics of this entry-level Zeiss.

### CABELA'S GUIDE SERIES 8X32

**SCORE: 79.2 PRICE: \$250**



**A MID-SIZE BINOCULAR SHOULD** behave like a good hunting dog, staying out of the way until needed and then outperforming your expectations. With that comparison in mind, it's easy to imagine Cabela's Guide Series bino as a faithful Lab. The 32mm optic is not going to win any style awards—its pebbly armor, reliable controls, and single-hinge construction are durable but not especially stirring. But the 17-ounce bino gets the job done with good Japanese glass and surprisingly nice balance and in-hand feel for a mid-size binocular, a class that can often feel front-heavy.

The Guide Series dominated the mid-size field in our low-light test. It got good grades for durability and versatility, and in our catchall "meets purpose" criteria, which favors compactness and versatility.

This binocular's most surprising attribute, though, is its price. The 8X Guide Series costs \$250, which is impressive considering it outperformed half the full-size binos in the field. Longtime readers know that we advise buying the most expensive binocular you can afford, with the understanding that when it comes to sporting optics, price and performance are directly proportional. But Cabela's Guide Series is a reminder that a solid, serviceable optic needn't have a comma in its price.







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FULL-SIZE BINOCULAR  
TEST RESULTS

SCORES & PRICING

FULL-SIZE BINOCULAR

TEST RESULTS

			TOTAL	IMAGE RESOLUTION	IMAGE QUALITY	LOW-LIGHT	MECHANICS	VERSATILITY	COMFORT	ERGONOMICS	DURABILITY	MEETS PURPOSE	VALUE	PRICE
	LEICA ULTRAVID HD-PLUS 10X42	EDITOR'S CHOICE	88.3	10	9.5	7	8.75	9.13	9.25	8.88	8.5	9.5	7.75	\$2,499
	ZEISS VICTORY SF 10X42		87.2	6.4	9.38	9	8.63	8.75	10	9.75	8.75	9.5	7	\$2,650
	MEOPTA MEOSTAR B1 HD 12X50		86.5	8.2	9.13	9.5	8.25	7.88	8.75	8.38	9.25	8.75	8.38	\$1,399
	CABELA'S INSTINCT EURO HD 15X56		82.4	5	8.63	10	8.38	7.13	8.38	7.88	9	9.38	8.63	\$1,599
	BUSHNELL LEGEND M SERIES 8X42	GREAT BUY	81.9	8.2	8.38	7.3	7.75	8	8.13	8.13	8.13	8.75	9.13	\$379
	MAVEN B1 10X42		79.2	8.5	7.38	7.8	8.13	7.75	7.5	7.88	8	8.63	7.63	\$900
	MINOX BL HD 10X44		77.2	6.4	7.13	7.3	8.25	8.38	6.88	7.75	8.25	8.25	8.63	\$499
	VANGUARD ENDEAVOR ED II 8X42		75.7	6.1	7.88	6.3	7.63	8.12	8.38	8	7.38	8	7.88	\$499
	STEINER WILDLIFE XP 8X44		75.2	9.1	8.38	6	7.25	7.13	7.5	7.13	8	7.5	7.25	\$1,999
	VORTEX CROSSFIRE 8X42		75.1	8.5	7.25	6.8	7	7.5	7.63	7.25	7.13	7.75	8.25	\$159
	BRESSER H.S. SOL 10X42		67.5	6.7	7	5.8	6.88	7.13	6.63	6.88	6.75	7	6.75	\$350

MID-SIZE BINOCULAR  
TEST RESULTS

# MID-SIZE BINOCULAR TEST RESULTS

			TOTAL	IMAGE RESOLUTION	IMAGE QUALITY	LOW-LIGHT	MECHANICS	VERSATILITY	COMFORT	ERGONOMICS	DURABILITY	MEETS PURPOSE	VALUE	PRICE
	CABELA'S GUIDE SERIES 8X32	GREAT BUY	79.2	6.6	7.5	9.2	7.88	8.13	7.75	7	8	8.88	8.25	\$250
	VANGUARD ENDEAVOR ED 8X32		77.9	8.1	7.38	8.8	7.75	7.5	7.63	7.75	7.25	7.75	8	\$299
	SIG SAUER ZULU 3 10X32		76.6	10	7.13	5	7.75	7.88	7.88	8.5	7.75	7.25	7.5	\$270
	STEINER XC 8X32		76.2	5.3	8.13	6.9	7.75	8.5	7.75	7.75	8.38	8.25	7.5	\$459
	ZEISS TERRA ED 8X32		71.4	5	7	6.5	8	7.63	7.63	7.38	7.63	7.75	6.88	\$411

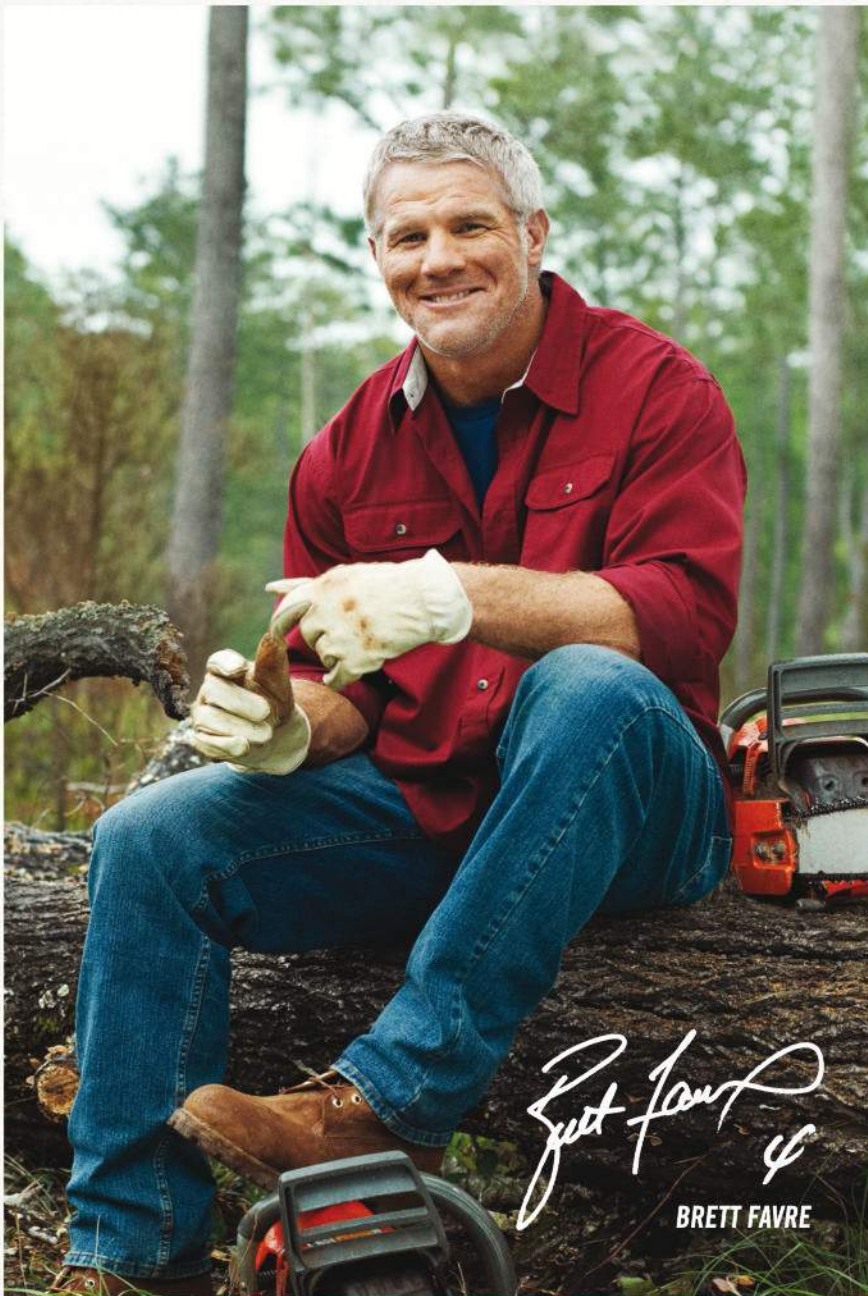
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HOW  
WE TEST

**B**ecause binoculars are basically precision instruments, their optical attributes are measurable. Our test is designed to quantify optical performance, but also to grade their fit, durability, style, and more esoteric characteristics.

We start by measuring optical resolution—how precisely a binocular “sees”—on a resolution target. Then we take the optics to

the field at sunset and perform a low-light test that evaluates how far into twilight they can render detail. Our team then evaluates their performance as hard-wearing hunting instruments. We divide the field based on objective lens diameter (33mm and larger are grouped as full-size bins). The highest-scoring binocular is named Editor's Choice. Those with the top value scores get our Great Buy award.





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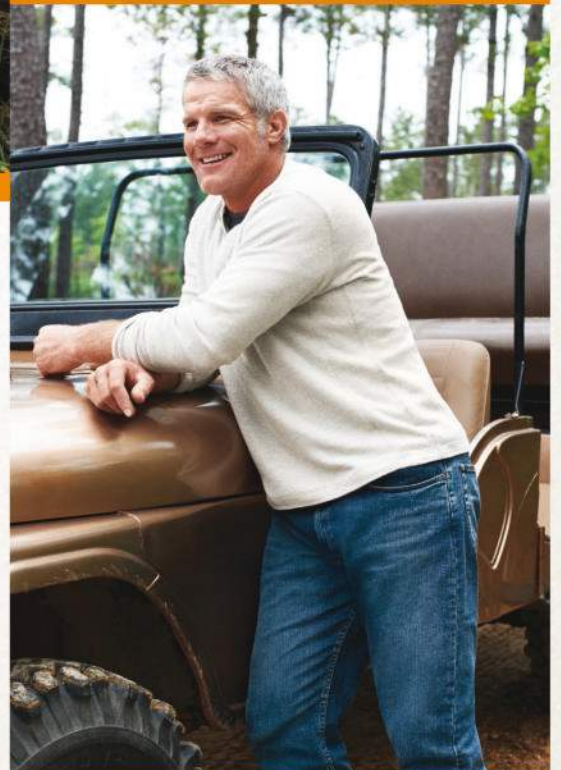


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# HUNTING

WHITETAILS

## WEED WHACKERS

+ Broad-spectrum herbicides and genetically modified crops have transformed American agriculture. But a growing body of evidence suggests that “clean” fields may be having an affect on Midwest deer populations.  
BY TONY HANSEN



### TIP

Spray squeaky metal treestand platforms with rubber paint to dampen the creaks of screws, chains, and any metal-on-metal contact.

LANCE KRUEGER



**F**ind America's corn and soybean belt on a map. Then find the counties that have produced the most trophy whitetail bucks. The overlap between the two is striking.

Whitetails have thrived in the presence of industrial grain production for decades, but some biologists and deer managers are suggesting that the newest farming practices aren't universally good for deer. In part that's because large-scale farms are so efficient that there's little forage for wildlife once the crops are harvested, and partly it's because farmers have become very good at killing weeds and other non-commodity vegetation, plants that wildlife biologists identify as habitat for everything from songbirds to whitetails.

I'm not that old, but I can remember a time when the corn and bean fields in my area of southern Michigan were quite different from today's. Mainly, they were weedy.

Stalking through a field of standing corn in search of bedded whitetails wasn't nearly the simple task it is now. Peering down the rows in the 1980s meant looking for patches of brown amidst the grasses that grew between them. Today? The space between each row is like an earthen highway from end to end, with nary a weed in sight. And that

squeaky-clean agricultural landscape may be one reason deer across the Midwest are on a long and steady decline.

#### UNDERSTANDING GMO CROPS

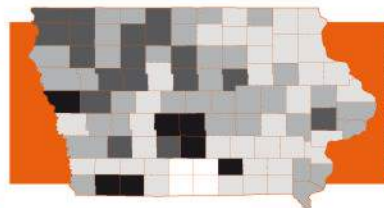
► Genetically modified organisms (GMOs, as they are popularly called) and broad-spectrum herbicides are largely responsible for high-yield agricultural production.

GMOs are the result of a laboratory process in which the genes from one species are extracted and inserted into the genes of another.

Today, roughly 90 percent of all agricultural corn planted in the United States is of the GMO variety, along with 95 percent of soybeans and 90 percent of canola, cotton, and sugar beets. Most of those GMO varieties—particularly corn and soybeans—are glyphosate-resistant. Glyphosate is a herbicide, not a GMO.

"There is a lot of misunderstanding about GMOs and glyphosate," says Kip Adams, director of education and outreach for the Quality Deer Management Association. "I think sometimes when people are sharing concerns about GMOs, they are really sharing concerns about the use of glyphosate."

Such confusion is understandable. Glyphosate, a herbicide perhaps best known by its brand name, Roundup, has become the



- >70% deer decline, higher crop cover
- 50%-70% deer decline
- 25%-50% deer decline
- 0%-25% deer decline
- Deer increases, lower crop cover

#### Deer and Crop Conversion in Iowa

In Iowa, where whitetail populations dropped 45 percent between 2003 and 2013, the declines have been most precipitous in counties with the greatest agricultural use. In southern and northeastern Iowa, in counties with rougher terrain and a lower percentage of crop coverage, deer declines have been about half the statewide average. Those counties have had a high percentage of CRP, but as this map indicates, they are also counties with the greatest CRP loss since 2008.

go-to chemical for farmers (and food plotters) who plant herbicide-resistant GMO corn and soybeans. Even the classification for seeds that are genetically modified to be resistant to glyphosate—Roundup Ready—indicates the close relationship between crop and herbicide. And the use of both is increasing. Data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture shows that herbicide use (with glyphosate being far and away the most used

LANCE KRUEGER

Standing corn and big bucks go hand in hand. But once the crop is harvested, deer rely on weeds and grasses for food.



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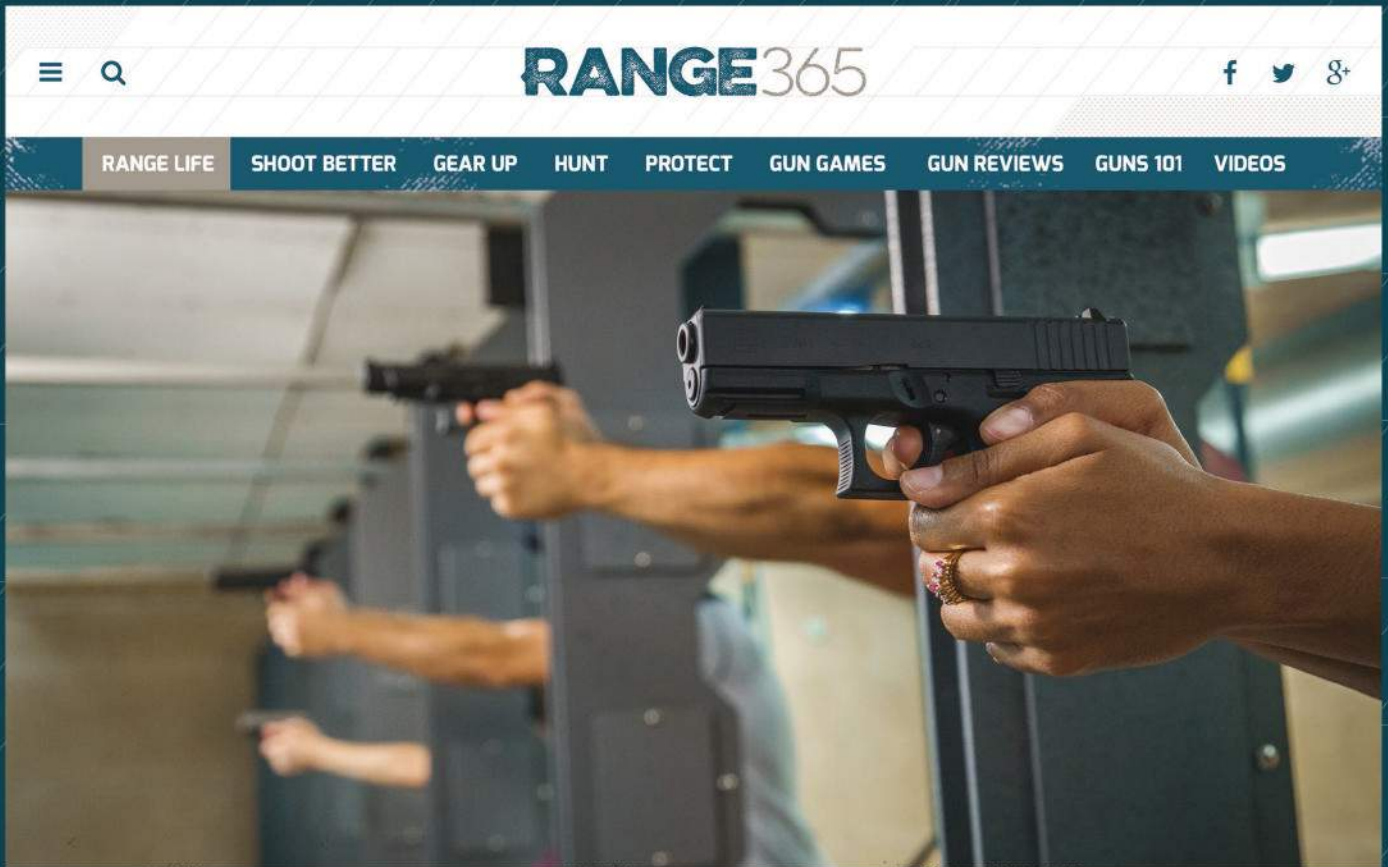
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## BUCK BRUSH

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### MIDWEST

Ragweed, greenbrier,  
trumpet creeper



### SOUTHEAST

Greenbrier,  
honeysuckle, pokeweed



### NORTHEAST

Bracken fern, brambles,  
wild grape

Obsessed food-plotters are really just small-scale farmers. And just like many of our commodity-scale neighbors, we instinctively abhor weeds. But just because a plant didn't originate in a shiny plastic bag doesn't mean it's not deer food.

In fact, some of the weeds that infiltrate your plots can be just as palatable and nutritious as that brassica blend.

Above is a regional list of three species you may find sprouting up in your untreated food plots that a Quality Deer Management Association survey of state wildlife agencies revealed as important native browse for deer.

chemical) increased from 15 million pounds in 1996 to 159 million pounds in 2012. Nationwide, whitetail populations have declined some 25 percent since 2000.

A coincidence? Probably. But the inverse relationship between increases in genetically and chemically intensive agriculture and declining deer populations is unsettling to some observers.

### NO SMOKING GUN

► "Part of my job is to make sure I'm reading every bit of credible research I can that relates to whitetails and wildlife," says Adams. "And there is not a single, credible, peer-reviewed study that I'm aware of that shows GMOs are bad for deer or bad for wildlife. And the same goes for glyphosate."

But, Adams says, there might be GMO- and glyphosate-related impacts that are less easy to track.

"I think GMO crops and those treated with glyphosates are perfectly safe so long as you're following the application directions, he says. "But I have seen some impacts from having such 'clean' plots and fields. I've noticed there is much less diversity in the plots and fields. That's less habitat for wildlife."

Approximately 90 million acres each of corn and soybeans were planted in the United States this year, the vast majority of which were GMO varieties treated with glyphosate. At just 1 percent of weed coverage, that's 1.8 million acres of grassy habitat that could support wildlife and provide some

measure of forage diversity for whitetails. But those 1.8 million acres are missing under GMO-dominated agricultural practices, and the heartland is also losing thousands of acres of grass-dominated Conservation Reserve Program acreage as landowners turn CRP ground into row crops.

The wholesale loss of weedy cover is something that's worth discussing, Adams says.

"I used to be really fussy about weeds in my food plots," he says. "But now I don't worry about it quite as much, and I'm seeing more wildlife in and around them. It's just an observation, but it's something that makes sense, and I'm not the only one seeing the same things. A lot of deer managers are noticing the positive effects of weedy food plots."

Jeff Sturgis, owner of Wildlife Habitat Solutions, makes his living by analyzing hunting parcels and providing their owners with a blueprint for habitat improvements. Like Adams, he believes GMO crops and glyphosate use is completely safe. But he thinks the "cleanliness" of ag fields and food plots can actually play into our hands as hunters.

"I'm a big believer in separation of food and cover," Sturgis says. "I don't necessarily want deer bedding in the same place that they're feeding. Those clean fields and food sources mean the deer aren't going to hang out there unless they're feeding. To bed, they need to travel, and that makes them vulnerable to hunters."

TOUGH  
LUCK?  
NO  
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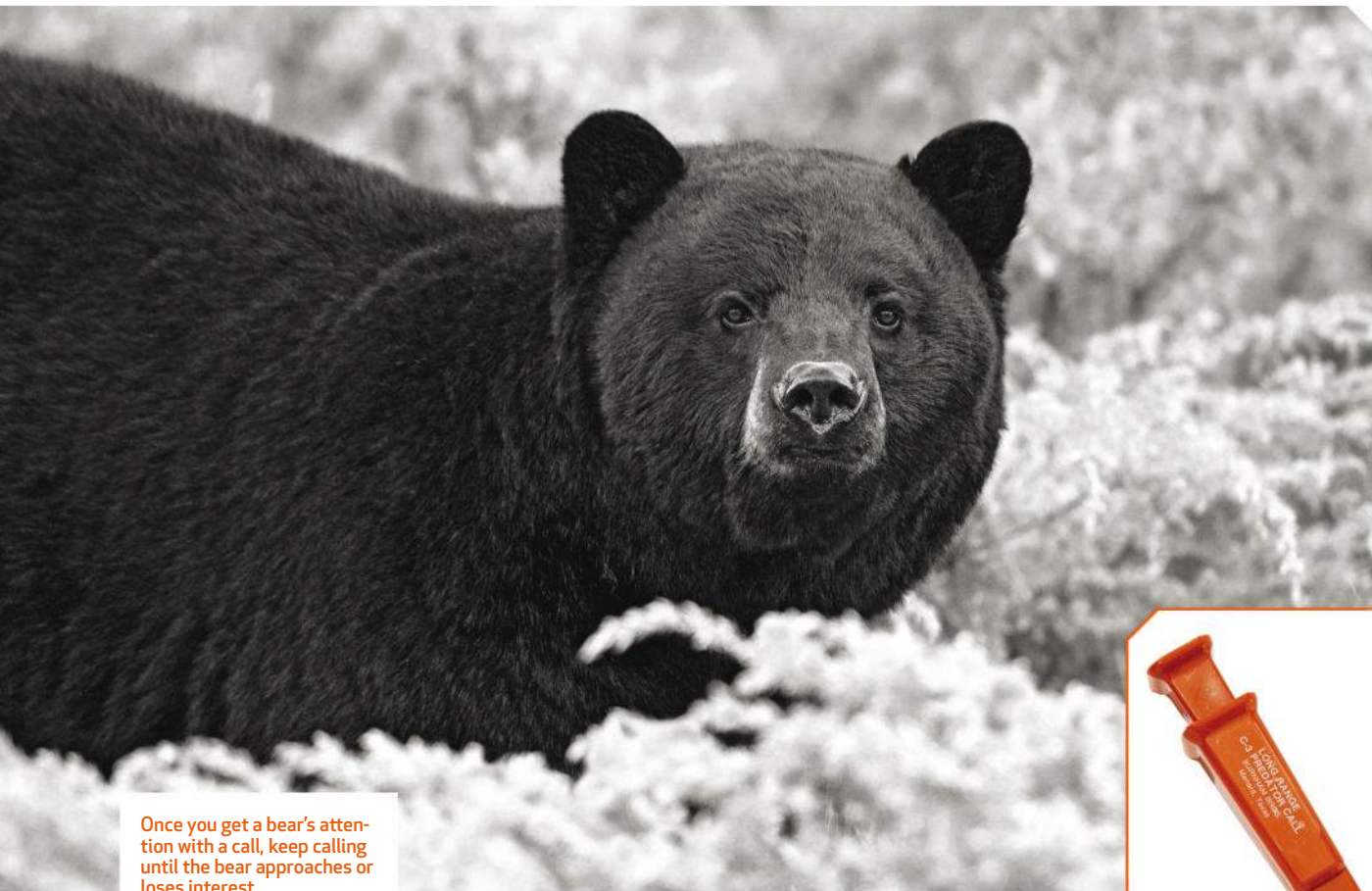
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# BEAR IN THE AIR

APPEAL TO THE APPETITE OF FALL BRUINS BY USING PREY DISTRESS CALLS **BY RICHARD P. SMITH**



Once you get a bear's attention with a call, keep calling until the bear approaches or loses interest.

**T**om Anderman from Mt. Pleasant, Mich., spent his Upper Peninsula bear hunt sweltering over a bait site on unseasonably warm September afternoons and listening to coyotes howl in the distance.

Bears were hitting the bait, but always after dark. So on the last day of his hunt with Wild Spirit Guide Service, Anderman decided to use a dying-rabbit predator call to try to entice a coyote into range.

He squealed three times every half hour. No coyotes came in, but toward evening a young black bear ambled into range. Half an hour later, a much bigger bear appeared, ears cocked to the sound of the wounded rabbit. Anderman killed the bruin, which had a live weight of 483 pounds and dressed out at 412.

## CALLING BEARS

A call that imitates the screams of a dying rabbit or a fawn in distress can be the key to filling a fall black bear tag anywhere bears are hunted in North America. As bruins search for as much food as possible to build fat reserves for the coming winter, they are frequently willing to take advantage of what they perceive to be an easy meal. The path to success is setting up within earshot of a hungry bear.

The ideal scenario for calling is when you spot a bear that's beyond bow or rifle range and you want to bring it closer. If the bear

responds favorably, keep it up as much as possible, especially if the animal goes out of sight. If you must take a break from calling to catch your breath or reposition, don't pause for long. Bears tend to lose interest fast once the sound of a promising meal stops.

Where terrain isn't open enough to spot bears at a distance, scout for natural food sources such as fruits, nuts, and berries. If you find bear sign, set up downwind early and late in the day, and try cold calling. Black bears also love corn, oats, and other grains, so calling in the vicinity of fields that are being raided by bruins can be effective, too.

Where it's legal to hunt bears over bait but the bruins are only feeding after dark, calling, as Anderman did, might be the trick that's needed to get a shot during legal shooting hours.

To avoid being caught by surprise, call from a treestand. Or if you're hunting on the ground, pair up with a partner and sit back-to-back. If both hunters are bowhunting, carry pepper spray or handguns for backup. When you're in grizzly country, try to call where you are least likely to attract a grizzly, but be prepared in case one shows up. Stop calling immediately if you see a grizzly approaching.



Any call that imitates the distress wails of prey animals will attract fall bears. The Burnham Brothers C-3 call, shown here, mimics cottontails.



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# UPLAND DOUBLES

TOP QUAIL LOADS THAT WILL  
ALSO REACH OUT FOR ROOSTERS  
BY JARROD SPILGER

**W**hen it comes to quail loads, lighter and smaller is usually better. An ounce of No. 7½s or even 8s will usually get the job done, especially over pointers. But what if pheasants are also on the menu? Across much of the bobwhite's northern range, quail and pheasants often share the same haunts. Upland hunters need a load that's stout enough to drop tough roosters yet has enough pellets to avoid any quail-size gaps in the pattern. In places where I might encounter either species, my first barrel is usually loaded with a 12-gauge, 2¾-inch load with 1¼ or 1½ oz. of No. 5s or 6s. If my dog finds quail, I'll shoot that load on the covey rise, then put in a spreader load and go after the singles. Here are some proven performers for quail in pheasant country.



A covey of bobwhites blows out of cover in front of hunters and a locked-up pointer.



## SPREADER LOAD

**PROVEN:** Polywad Spread-R, 12-gauge, 1½ oz., 1,200 fps, No. 7½ lead. Polywad's versatile spreader rounds are my secret weapon in the battle against close-range quail. Spread-R is also available in 16-, 20-, and 28-gauge. (\$15/25 rounds; [polywad.com](http://polywad.com))

**ALSO CONSIDER:** For closer shots, Herter's Super Spreader 12-gauge, 1¼ oz., 1,200 fps, No. 7 lead. After the initial covey rise, load this heavy spreader round and go after the singles. (\$7/25 rounds; [cabelas.com](http://cabelas.com))



## DOUBLE-SPECIES LOAD

**PROVEN:** Hevi-Game, 12-gauge, 1½ oz., 1,250 fps, No. 6 lead (No. 7 also available). This new lead-shot offering has become one of my favorite quail takers, and it works equally well on pheasants. Hevi-Upland, which is identical to Hevi-Game, is available in Nos. 5 and 6 lead. (\$10/25 rounds; [hevi-shot.com](http://hevi-shot.com))

**ALSO CONSIDER:** If you're hunting nontoxic zones, Hevi-Metal Pheasant, 12-gauge, 1½ oz., 1,500 fps, Nos. 5 and 4 steel/tungston mix. (\$24/25 rounds)



## UPLOAD FOR PHEASANT

**PROVEN:** Herter's Select Field Pheasant 12-gauge, 1¼ oz., 1,200 fps, No. 5 lead. This is one of the best upland loads I've used. Every rooster I hit with this affordable yet potent load (available exclusively from Cabela's) was dead in the air. It has proved equally effective at bagging bobwhites, especially at medium yardages, once they got out from some holes in the pattern at close ranges. The load should be gentle on fragile upland guns. (\$7/25 rounds; [cabelas.com](http://cabelas.com))





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The author (right) and his hunting companions with a bull killed deep in Montana's Bob Marshall Wilderness.

# EARLY RIFLE ELK

WILDERNESS AREAS GIVE GUN HUNTERS A CRACK AT RUTTING BULLS **BY JOHN B. SNOW**

**T**he echo of an elk bugle, the thunderclap crack of fighting bulls, and the comfort of chasing wapiti in short sleeves. These experiences are typically reserved for hunters who carry archery tackle afield in September.

But if you're willing to cover some miles—some very serious miles—you can hunt elk with a rifle during these prime times as well.

In designated wilderness areas in Montana (and in some backcountry units in Idaho and Wyoming), rifle hunters can start elk hunting in the middle of September—the 15th is the kickoff date—well before the state's general rifle seasons open in late October.

These wilderness hunts are the real deal. You will never spy a pickup creeping along a Forest Service road nor hear the whine of an ATV nor encounter hordes of hunters festooned in blaze orange. However, this solitude comes at a price that few are willing to pay. Namely, you

have to get into this raw country on foot or on horseback and be ready to handle any contingency on your own. But the experience is like no other, and it's what draws me to the backcountry each fall.

Here are some key things to consider should you wish to try it for yourself.

## BASE CAMP

► Backcountry camps come in two basic flavors. There's the full wall-tent experience, and then there's going ultralight. If you're packing in on horseback, a wall-tent camp is the more

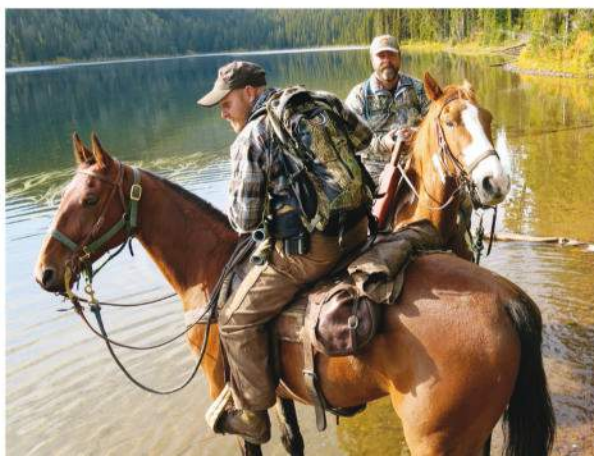
comfortable and convenient option. But if you lack stock to transport you and your kit into the wild, a three-season tent, 10-degree sleeping bag, and cooking setup that emphasize quality and light weight are the way to go.

## HOW TO HUNT

► The size of these wilderness areas can be daunting. Pick an accessible drainage or two to focus on while glassing, listening for bugles, and looking for sign. The regular rules guiding elk hunts apply: Watch for elk feeding in the open at first light, then still-hunt through timber and other cover during the heat of the day.

But think before you shoot. Never forget that you have to haul that meat out, and if you're doing it on foot, you might want to reconsider whether that bull across the drainage is worth the effort.

I shot my bull last season in the late afternoon while cruising around on horseback. We had spied some mule deer on







a bench above us and rode up to investigate. As we ambled along, I saw the yellow hide of a young bull among a small herd of cows in the timber. He presented an easy 70-yard shot, and I notched my tag.

## BEARS

► Montana's wilderness areas are bear country. Your chances of having a grizzly encounter are pretty good—or bad, depending on your perspective. We had a run-in with a griz during our trip in the Bob Marshall Wilderness last fall. Someone's horse had died along a trail, and in the pre-dawn murk, we surprised a bear on the carcass. A mini rodeo ensued, with horses bucking and wheeling and the bear tearing off through the underbrush. After a tough (and fruitless) day of hunting, we had to get back to camp on that same trail, this time in the dead of night. We turned our headlamps on and our singing voices up as we approached the spot. The bear had clearly been feeding again just prior to our return, but the noise we made gave it ample warning to move off, so we avoided a second close call.

Use common sense when dealing with bears. Never run. If you're hunting with a group, stick close together—don't split up—and make plenty of noise should you encounter a grizzly. If you're on foot, have bear spray or a pistol, or both, at the ready. Keep a lookout as you field dress an animal.

## GUNS AND AMMO

► A flat-shooting and accurate rifle in a hard-hitting caliber is best, given the variety of shots (and critters) you might encounter. I carried my Montana Rifle Company 7mm Rem. Mag., which is ideal for the backcountry. I wouldn't go much lighter than that in bear country. I recommend a heavy-for-caliber bonded lead bullet, such as the 160-grain AccuBond I shot, or a quality monolithic projectile. Whichever you choose, use a bullet that will penetrate deeply and has the ability to break through the large bones of an elk without coming to pieces.



A backcountry bull. Rifles and optics should be tough and reliable; packing in, and out. The classic—and most efficient—way to travel here is on horseback.



## WILDERNESS UNITS

► There are four units in Montana that offer backcountry hunts: Districts 150, 151, 280, and 316. The first two units are in the famed Bob Marshall Wilderness, where I hunted last year. The other two are the Scapegoat and Absaroka wildernesses, respectively.

The backcountry rifle seasons run from September 15 to November 29. ([fwp.mt.gov](http://fwp.mt.gov))





# NOWHERE TO HIDE

TACKLE AND TACTICS FOR  
OPEN-COUNTRY BOWHUNTING  
BY ARAM VON BENEDIKT

**S**ighting elk ears and antlers coming over the rise toward me, I collapsed into the sage, taking a frantic glance behind me at the tree line. Much too far away—I'd never make it. Turning back to the elk, I watched 12 cows and one really nice 5x6 bull high-step it over the crest and into full view.

I needed to raise myself to my knees and then get drawn on the elk without alerting them. In slow motion, I worked myself upright, shivering from the cold. Ever so slowly, I raised my bow from the Utah sage. The elk continued to graze, and my confidence grew. Clipping my release to the string, I slowly tried to draw my bow. *Hmm, that's odd.* I tried again, harder this time. No luck. My chilled,

[1] Open-country bow sights should have at least 5 pins. [2] Your rangefinder should be stowed out of the way of your bowstring at full draw. [3] Kneepads enable you to remain in a kneeling position for several minutes. [4] Full-coverage masks mute the gleam of your face. [5] Light-soled boots allow you to feel the terrain and stalk quietly. [6] A piece of light yarn attached to your stabilizer serves as a wind indicator.

adrenaline-shot muscles had lost vigor. I focused all my energy and tried again. I was 11 days into a backcountry hunt and wanted this elk badly. No luck—I couldn't draw my bow.

With no other option, I pointed the bow in the air above me and hauled on the string. It finally came back, but as I leveled on the bull, he was staring at me, every muscle tense. Trembling and fighting a 30 mph crosswind, I waved my 50-yard pin at the bull and jerked the trigger. As my arrow hit the dirt and the bull left for Wyoming, I fell over on the ground, giggling hysterically.

Open-country bowhunting presents far different challenges than does typical white-tail hunting. Whether you hunt elk, mule deer, pronghorns, or even CRP whitetails, here's what I've learned that will help you meet the challenges of an open-country adventure.

## RIG FOR DISTANCE

- Ensure your sight contains a bubble level, and practice leveling your bow for every shot. Practice shooting out to 70 yards. Add a good

peep sight to your string. Install a full-capture rest and tune it for perfect arrow flight.

- Carry a small rangefinder. Hang its pouch in an easy-access, easy-stow location. You won't always have time to deploy it, so practice estimating range while hiking or hunting. Pick out an object, estimate its range, and then check yourself with the rangefinder.

## GET CLOSE

- Shrink the distance. Use every bit of available cover to screen your advance. Trees, rocks, and brush all can give you the necessary concealment. The best is the terrain itself. Ravines, ridges, and waterways can provide you with a path to your target. Keep the wind to your advantage and whittle down the distance until you are within range.

- Wear quiet clothing. Carry water in a collapsible water bladder for silent hydra-

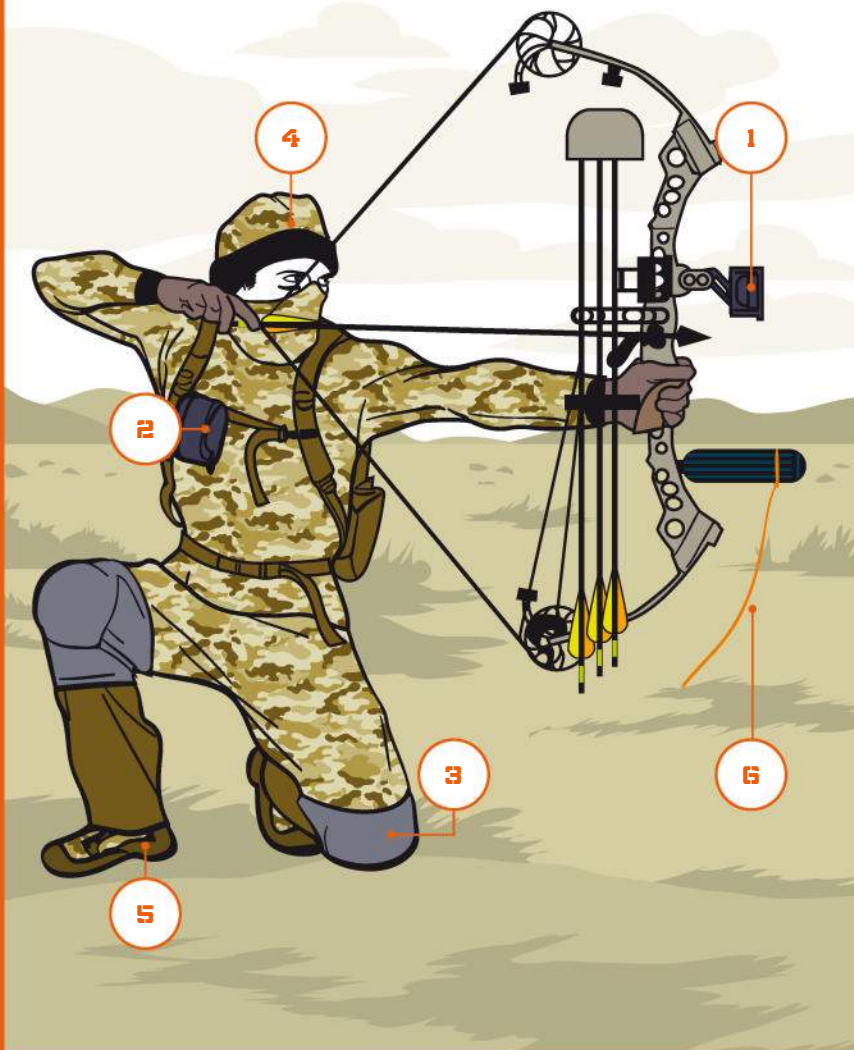
tion. Footwear should be lightweight and comfortable.

## PICK YOUR SHOT

- Get a range and then read the wind. Unless you shoot thousands of arrows every year in windy conditions, don't attempt a long shot in wind. Either get closer or pass up the shot. It's not worth the risk of a bad hit.

- Read your prey. At a distance, an alert animal will "jump the string" and be gone before your arrow arrives. Learn to predict whether he will stay put; don't take the shot if an animal is alert, tense, looking at you, or moving.

- Follow through. It's tempting to raise your head to see your arrow strike the animal. Don't. Maintain your form and keep your eye on the animal to gauge its reaction. That will tell you a lot about whether you have a short or long retrieve ahead of you.





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# ANATOMY OF AN ELK CALL

TUNING AN OPEN-REED CALL TO SOUND MORE LIKE A COW STARTS WITH UNDERSTANDING HOW ITS VARIOUS PARTS WORK **BY TOBY WALRATH**

**O**ff-the-shelf calls might not sound like an elk, and there are reasons for that. Some of those things are within your control and some aren't, but you don't have to be satisfied with the sound of a call right out of the package. Here's what makes a call sound good and a few tips to make it sound great. Remember: If it doesn't sound like an elk, change it.

## REED CALL PARTS AND FUNCTIONS

### || TONE BOARD ||

The shape of the tone board's tip determines how easily the reed will freeze to it in cold weather. The board should taper down and away from the reed, but not so much that the reed can bend. The channel in the soundboard should create a back-pressure effect like that of a trumpet. Rout out this channel to create more resonance.

### || REED ||

Thin reeds, down to .01-inch-thick, are sensitive and easier to blow, but they're relatively quiet and don't project well. Blowing too hard on a thin reed can result in the reed's shrieking to a stop mid-call. That's bad. Thicker reeds—between .015 and .0175 inch—can be blown harder, giving the caller the ability to produce a loud long-range call. The width of a reed matters, too. As a general rule, narrow reeds create high-pitched sounds and wide reeds yield much deeper sounds. Reed replacements are cheap and can be sanded and trimmed to produce the perfect sound.

### || KEEPER ||

The keeper simply holds the reed in place at the bottom of the tone board. It's not critical for sound, but look for simple keepers to facilitate easy reed replacement.

### || BARREL ||

The barrel can be as simple as a 2-inch hollow piece of wood or as complex as a ribbed polymer tube bent into a horn shape. Adding a length of flexible tube to the barrel can drastically change the quality of the sound and projection of the call. I often use duct tape or superglue to add a barrel extension. This may be ugly, but these alterations can help make a good call great by creating more resonance and back pressure.

### || RUBBER BAND ||

Moving the rubber band (or adding one) changes the reed's fulcrum point, affecting the length and pitch of the calls you make. The band is also a convenient mark to help you achieve a consistent mouth placement. Consider marking two or three points along the tone board so you can change from short chirps to long estrous moans simply by moving the rubber band to those defined spots.





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**HUNTING**  
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# TEAL TERROIR

EARLY-SEASON WATERFOWLING HAS RICH REGIONAL VARIATION **BY ERIC MATHES**

**S**erious waterfowlers have this in common: They look forward to early-season teal hunting almost as much as they dread the heat, humidity, and mosquitoes that accompany this September event. But they also have different hunting styles, based on regional traditions and hunting conditions.



## MARYLAND

### Hold Your Fire

Capt. Daniel Houck of Black Duck Outfitters guides teal hunters in the mud flats and tidal marshes of the Chesapeake Bay's Eastern Shore. He spends afternoons scouting birds, with a fishing rod in one hand and a binocular in the other.

"Nothing beats rockfishing and crabbing with a bino," Houck says. When he sets up the following morning, he throws out a dozen honker floaters among his teal spread to give his decoys more visibility than those of competing guides on the public water.

Houck counsels his hunters to wait until teal are swarming his spread. After the first shots, hunters can double and triple on birds that hang over the decoys.



## MISSOURI

### Go Late

Ira McCauley of Habitat Flats and MoMarsh sums up teal season with one word: simplicity.

"Unlike chasing mallards or pintails, teal hunting is not an equipment-intensive deal," McCauley says. "A dozen brown decoys, a Mojo Dove, and a green T-shirt are all you really need." But sunglasses and a heavy dose of bug spray are also critical.

In Missouri, success weighs heavily on the migration, and lately, the later in September, the better.

When teal arrive, they come in force. Pick out singles, he advises, as flock shooting will put a hunter over the limit fast.

"Do a little homework. Put yourself close to the X," he says. "A few spinners and a couple of decoys, and you're in the game."

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## LOUISIANA

### Huddle on the Levees

If there's one thing Cajuns like Roland Louque take seriously, it's teal season.

Louque considers it a warm-up for the big ducks that start showing up in November. With plenty of grass still standing on the levees, teal hunters are able to hide without the use of sunken pit blinds or elaborate camo.

The hardest part of hunting in September in the South is the temperature. But hunters in the right spot can be finished before the heat of the day arrives.

Louque knows that big flocks of acrobatic birds can easily lure a gunner into flock shooting.

"You gotta be quick," he says.

"Pick a bird and follow it up when it starts climbing. I use an open choke and No. 6 steel. That's my favorite recipe."



Biologists estimate this year's teal flight will number 12 million, including 8.5 million bluewings.

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# DEER OF THE YEAR

EVERY SERIOUS DEER HUNTER CHASES THE SAME DREAM OF ONE DAY TAKING "THE ONE"—A BUCK WITH A RACK OF SUCH IMMENSE PROPORTIONS THAT THEY WONDER IF SUCH A CREATURE COULD EVEN BE REAL. FOR THESE 26 HUNTERS, THE CHASE IS OVER

BY THE EDITORS ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY VINCENT SOYEZ



Ben Zuern with a 192 $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch giant taken during the 2014 Wisconsin archery season.





Zuern named the buck "Heartbreaker." Word of his existence was spreading, and eventually somebody might get their heart broken.



HE ONLY HUNTED EVENINGS TO AVOID PUSHING DEER OUT OF THE FIELD IN THE MORNING. BY NOVEMBER, HE KNEW SEVERAL OTHER PEOPLE WERE AFTER THE BUCK.



WASHINGTON COUNTY, WISCONSIN

# A MOVING PICTURE

*When a trail camera photo revealed a massive buck on his grandfather's 80-acre farm, Ben Zuern went on a mission. His objective? To take the biggest buck of his life / By Alex Robinson*

**B**EN ZUERN CAN'T STOP talking about beans. We're tromping through a small, hilly cornfield that had been planted with soybeans last year—the year he killed his biggest buck ever.

"I had the farmer leave this stretch of beans standing," Zuern says, pointing to the field edge where his stand is located. "By November, all the other crops were cut, and this little patch of beans had incredible drawing power."

It's a warm June afternoon in southeastern Wisconsin, so we tuck

beneath the shade of Zuern's stand tree and he tells me the story behind his buck, *Outdoor Life's* Deer of the Year.

The monster white-tail with a forked G-2 first appeared in a single trail camera picture on September 21. The deer is in midair in the photo, leaping over a field edge, his massive rack framed perfectly against a backdrop of yellowing beans. It was the biggest deer Zuern had ever seen in the 17 years he'd hunted his grandpa's 80-acre farm. What's more, the buck

showed up on camera about a month after Zuern's grandpa had died.

Don Zuern wasn't a hunter, but he did help sharpen Ben's shooting skills by putting a bounty on cowbirds (which are notorious for destroying songbird nests). Soon enough, Zuern emptied the old man's wallet by hauling in a bucket full of cowbirds—he tells me this story and we're quiet for a moment.

Zuern made it his mission to take the buck during the archery season. His girlfriend printed out the trail camera picture, framed it, and hung it in his room. Zuern only told one close hunting buddy about the deer. He even kept it a secret from his uncle, who occasionally hunts the farm.

"I would have been happy for him if he'd gotten the buck," Zuern says. "But our little farm can't take a lot of hunt-

ing pressure, so I kept it quiet."

A quick aside: Wisconsin is a top trophy-buck producer, but most of those deer come from ag country in the west (think Buffalo County). Southeastern Wisconsin is mostly small farms, suburbs, and little woodlots. There are big deer here, but they are far more rare.

Ben hunted hard but carefully, only sitting stands when the wind was perfect. He only hunted evenings to avoid pushing deer out of the field in the morning. By November, he knew that several other people were after the buck and it would only take one mistake to bump the deer off his property for good. Then, on November 6, he saw the buck in person for the very first time.

Zuern watched from across the field as the buck crossed a road right next to a neighbor's house and then walked past his bean stand (which he wasn't sitting in because the wind was wrong). He hunted the



**Left: Zuern's bow, a Mathews Outback. Below: Finally getting to pose with the buck he'd been hunting all fall.**





bean stand for the next two days and passed on several good bucks, but the big deer didn't show. A southeasterly wind kicked Ben off the field until November 12, when a cold front rolled in on a northwest wind.

Zuern was in his stand early that afternoon, and soon some does and small bucks filtered into his patch of beans. At 4:10, the giant buck he'd been waiting for appeared in the north corner of the field, and Zuern was struck by buck fever.

He watched the buck make a scrape, lick a branch, and then feed into an adjacent alfalfa field behind two does. As the minutes ticked by, Zuern began to settle down. About 20 minutes later, when the

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does began to work his way, he came to his senses.

Zuern ranged the buck at 25 yards as it walked into the beans. He drew, undetected by the three deer, and made a solid broadside shot. All three deer ran out into the middle of the field, but the big buck stopped at about 100 yards. He stood there for minutes as Zuern

watched through his binoculars, hoping the deer would tip over. And, finally, he did.

Still thinking it was too good to be true, Zuern waited until sundown before walking out to the buck and finally running his hands over the rack.

"It was one of the best moments of my life," he says. The buck gross scored 192  $\frac{3}{8}$  inches.

Before I leave the farm, I ask Zuern what it meant for him to kill the buck of a lifetime on his grandpa's property just a few months after he died.

"You just never know who might be up there helping you out," he says. "And, you never know about the 'buck of a lifetime'—maybe there's an even bigger one out there."

Zuern holds the trail cam photo of the giant buck leaping into a soybean field, which his girlfriend framed.

MESA COUNTY, COLORADO

# A MULEY FOR THE AGES

*Marine Corps veteran Brett Ross wanted a buck—any buck. What he got was a record-book entry*

**F**OR AS LONG as there has been war, students of humanity have examined why men have been drawn to it. Brett Ross of Mesa, Colo., has a simple, plain-folks explanation that makes pretty good sense:

"Our public lands," says Ross, a former Marine Corps infantryman. "They tie in to what I was fighting for as much as anything else—places where we hunters and our families can make memories we will cherish forever."

Ross' family had been making memories in this precise place for three generations, always setting up camp a week prior to the big-game season.

Ross' family and friends were all on hand for the annual hunt last fall. After an unsuccessful morning and a brief lunch, Ross, his fiancée, Kirsty, and his best friend, Levi, headed out from camp for the afternoon. Ross and his family are self-described meat hunters, and the plan for the day was simply to fill the freezer.

The trio spread out as they walked along, but after getting about three-quarters of a mile from camp, Ross saw his buddy waving him over. Closing the distance as quickly as he could, Ross arrived just in time for Levi to point off in the distance and whisper, "There's your buck!" As the

### IT WORKED FOR ME...

**GUN: BROWNING A-BOLT  
CALIBER: .300 WIN. MAG.**







**Above: Ross with his giant public-land muley. Right: Fiancée Kirsty gives him a congratulatory kiss back at camp.**

only hunter with a buck tag, Ross would be taking the shot.

"All I could see was 3 points," says Ross. "But I'm a meat hunter and knew that he was legal, so..."

*Boom!* The rifle shot echoed across the mountains, and Levi and Ross briefly celebrated the fact that once again they would bring venison back to camp.

"As we were getting closer, Levi could see the buck through an opening in the trees, but I couldn't," explains Ross. "And as we're walking down he keeps grabbing his binocular and yelling, 'You shot a toad, you shot a toad!'"

Continuing down the hill, anxious to see what Levi was so excited about, Ross finally got to where he could see the deer.

"I immediately dropped to one knee and put my hand on the ground, and all I could say was, 'Oh my God, oh my God.' I could finally see what I'd shot. I had thought it had 3 points, but now it had antlers going everywhere.



It was just surreal. I thought that at any moment Ashton Kutcher was going to jump out of the bushes and say, 'You got punked!'"

It was no prank. Back at camp, Ross' fiancée, friends, and family were all in awe of the giant mule deer. But it's the reaction that Ross got from his dad that stuck with him most.

"I had only seen that expression on his face twice before: when I graduated boot camp, and the day I came home from Iraq. I was just so excited to show the man who taught me everything about hunting my bloody hands and what I'd just killed."

Ross' buck measured just over 292 inches.

## WINONA COUNTY, MINNESOTA



# RUNNING DOWN A RUMOR

**A team of Gopher State hunting buddies make muzzleloading history on public land**

S

**STAN KREIDERMACHER'S** hunting party first learned about "Mean Gene" in the fall of 2013, when a local hunter captured photos of a 20-plus-point deer near the 21,000-acre Whitewater Wildlife Management Area in southeastern Minnesota. To Kreidermacher, the buck's size was inconceivable.

"Later that winter, my nephews asked a friend and avid bird hunter, Gene Stevens, for advice on a place to hunt pheasants," he says. "Gene recommended a chunk of state land close to where the trail cam pho-

tos had been taken. The boys kicked up a big deer there and returned later to search for sheds. They found both, which they estimated scored 220 inches. They only told a handful of people about the buck and even lied to some about finding the antlers—including me. Tucked away, the shed antlers wouldn't surface until the day I shot the deer."

December 13 was an unusually warm and foggy day. The party of 13 saw only one fawn during the first two drives. Kreidermacher was a sitter on the third drive and had just positioned himself at the intersection of several trails when a shot echoed through the valley.

"One of our hunters had just grazed the buck on top of the hill," he says. "Soon another shot rang out, this time from the middle of the hill. Another hunter







The trail camera image from 2013 that began the quest for Mean Gene.

had shot at a doe and was wishing he hadn't: Mean Gene was right on her tail. Before long I had does in front of me at an opening 60 yards away. I could hear grunting—another deer making its way down the hill. I caught a glimpse of its antlers, and I knew he was a shooter. When his horns reached the clearing, I settled my sights on his front shoulder and squeezed the trigger. When the smoke cleared, I could still see the does, but not a buck."

The initial search for blood was fruitless, but soon the entire party took up the hunt.

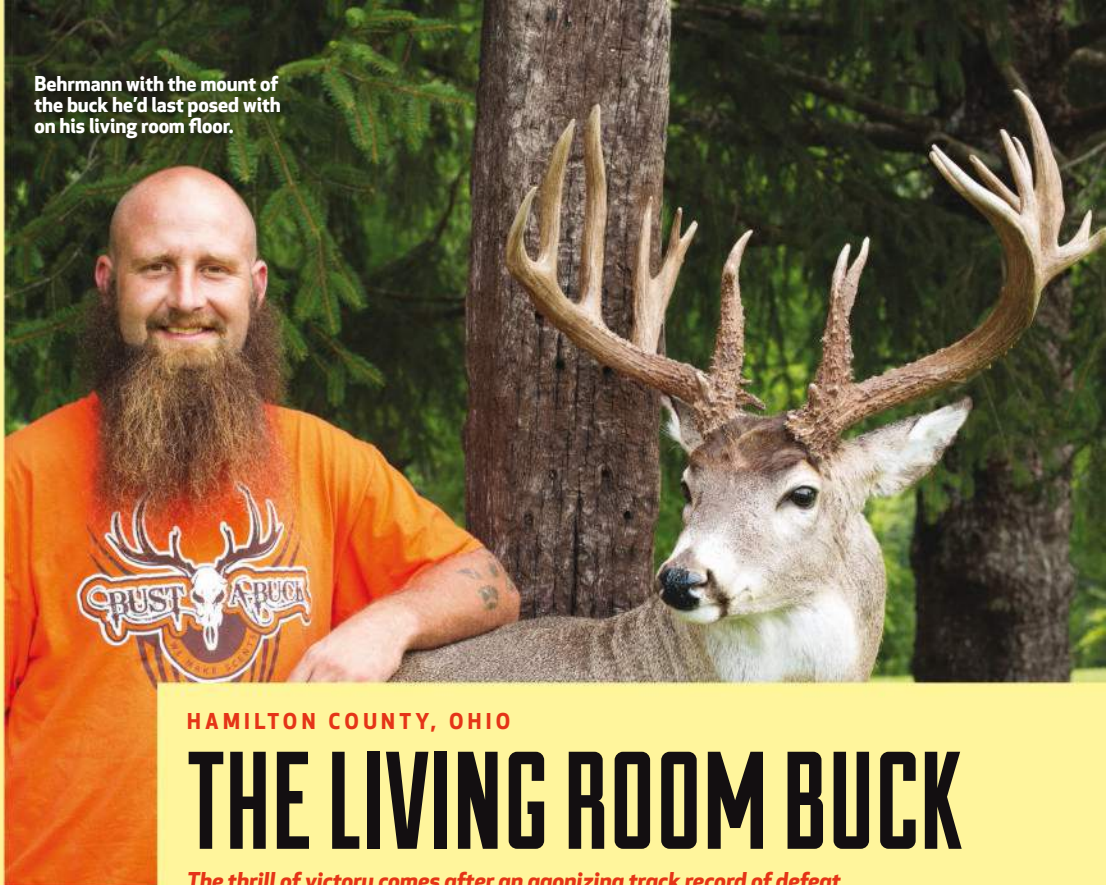
"One guy confirmed that he'd found a blood trail on the other side of the ditch," says Kreidermacher. "Three hunters, including my son, followed the trail and suddenly began screaming and hollering. I made my way toward the yelling. I couldn't believe my eyes: What lay before me was an absolute monster. It was a team effort."

The 28-point exceeded all original estimates and everyone's wildest dreams. The deer officially scored 248  $\frac{5}{8}$  inches non-typical, beating the previous Minnesota muzzleloader record by 22 inches.

#### IT WORKED FOR ME...

**GUN: THOMPSON/CENTER OMEGA  
CALIBER: .50**

Behrmann with the mount of the buck he'd last posed with on his living room floor.



HAMILTON COUNTY, OHIO

# THE LIVING ROOM BUCK

The thrill of victory comes after an agonizing track record of defeat

**B**EFORE MIKE Behrmann's huge buck hit the brand-spanking-new living room floor in front of his Christmas tree—and blew up the internet—his deer-hunting career had taken more twists and turns than a season of *Game of Thrones*.

"I'll be honest," says 31-year-old Behrmann, "I'd pretty much given up. I'd take off the whole month of November to hunt the rut, and had hit a couple of nice bucks during past bow seasons, but I didn't recover them. Then I shot a great, great buck, but some guys stole it along with two of my stands while I went home to get help to get him out. I'd had enough. But when my

son, Dylan, shot a big buck with his crossbow in November 2013 (142 gross, about 300 pounds), it got me going again."

Fast-forward to December 2, 2014, the second day of the Ohio general firearms season.

"I was supposed to hunt with my buddy Anthony Miracle," says Behrmann. "First, I overslept, then I forgot my treestand harness—I don't ever climb without a harness. It was midmorning by the time we got to the woods. I took my time getting to where I wanted to set up with my tripod chair. I had my rattling horns, Primos Buck Roar, and a can call. After a little while, I started calling softly."

The response was unexpected. "I kept hearing what sounded like a sick cow," says Behrmann. "I thought that it was Tony calling and even texted him to stop—it was bad."

It wasn't Tony. When Behrmann looked to the next ridge, he saw a huge body and then a huge rack. He knew instantly that it was far bigger than the 10-point he'd seen the day before.

"He was at 100 yards or so and

in a bunch of thick cover," he says. "I grabbed the bleat can call, turned it over once, and here he comes!"

The buck fell at the shot, slipped down the creek bank, and then ran. After a short tracking job and a finishing shot, Behrmann and his

buddy recovered the buck, the magnitude of which overwhelmed them.

But what about that crazy photo that made the rounds on the web?

Precisely how did Mike Behrmann's 25-point, 216  $\frac{2}{8}$ -inch, 220-pound buck wind up in his living room in front of the Christmas tree last December?

The hunters pulled into the driveway just as darkness fell. Heavy rain changed to snow, making it difficult to get good photos.

"That's when my wife, Andrea [OL's candidate for wife of the year], told us to bring him into the house," says Behrmann. "Now, we'd just gotten new hardwood floors put in and it wasn't something I was wanting to do. Besides, who in the heck takes deer pictures inside the house?"

Her answer: "We do—just make sure that you guys carry him inside. If you drag him, you'll mess up the cape."



#### IT WORKED FOR ME...

**GUN: REMINGTON 870, OPEN SIGHTS  
LOAD: 2  $\frac{3}{4}$ -INCH REMINGTON SLUGS  
CALLS: RATTLING HORNS, PRIMOS BUCK ROAR, PRIMOS ORIGINAL CAN CALL  
SCENT PREVENTION: SCENT-LOK SUIT**



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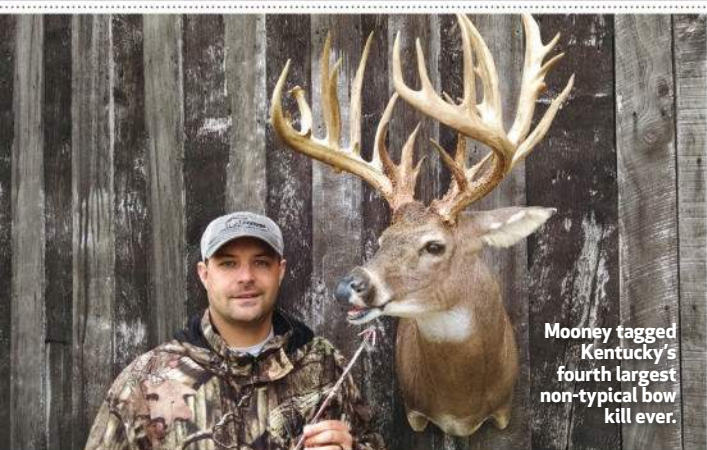
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## WEBSTER COUNTY, KENTUCKY



Mooney tagged Kentucky's fourth largest non-typical bow kill ever.

## OH, BABY

*Not even the birth of a firstborn on opening day could stop this quest for a record-book buck*



**LAST YEAR WAS** shaping up to be a pretty good one for Justin Mooney. The bowhunter finished in the top 10 at a national archery tourney, and just as summer turned to fall, he got a photo of a jaw-dropping buck on a trail camera. Then, as giant deer often do, the buck disappeared.

Mooney disappeared from the woods, too. Opening day found him in the hospital delivery room, awaiting the birth of his first child. Hunting took a backseat for a few weeks, and it wasn't until he checked the trail cam again that he really started itching to resume the chase: The buck was back.

The wind was just right on September 16, and Mooney's wife encouraged

him to take a break from babysitting. He was in his stand by 4:30 p.m.

It wasn't long before he heard movement about 30 yards off in the thick underbrush.

"I looked down, and all of a sudden there was the deer I was after," Mooney says. But the buck stood facing the tree without presenting a shot. Mooney's knees eventually stopped shaking. The buck wasn't going anywhere, he decided.

"He looked right at me at 23 yards, but it was too late. I was at full draw and shot."

The bruiser turned tail and ran 35 yards downhill before dropping. It officially scored 221 $\frac{1}{8}$  inches.

## IT WORKED FOR ME...

**BOW:** BEAR  
**AGENDA 7**  
**ATTRACTANTS:**  
C'MERE DEER  
BUCK JUICE,  
SUGAR BEET  
CRUSH

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS



## MARIAH EBERT, MONROE COUNTY, WISCONSIN

I shot my first deer when I was 10. It was a small doe, and all the kids at school made fun of me because it was so little.

This past season (I was 13 at the time), I was sitting in a double ladder stand with my dad during the youth hunt. There were two does hanging around and an 8-point. I was about to shoot that buck when my dad saw this big 10-point come out at 210 yards.

There was a doe just 40 yards away. She was going to bust us. My dad asked if I thought I could make the shot, and I said, 'Yes.' As soon as I found the buck in my scope, I took the shot. The buck fell down a hill, and we had to drag it up. It was bigger than I thought!

BILL WILSON,  
SUMMIT COUNTY, OHIO

It was January 19. I had a little over an hour to hunt, and the sun was setting when I heard one of my neighbors taking some target practice. I looked up from the snow and saw the buck at 20 yards. His drop tines looked like earrings against the snow. He started walking away, but then somehow turned broadside at 25 yards—I shot, and off he ran. I had a great blood trail to follow. He was officially scored at 190 $\frac{3}{4}$  net.

MATT SCHLOSSER,  
KNOX COUNTY, OHIO

November 5 was dreary and overcast. The corn had just been harvested, and as I hung my bow on the hanger, a buck that had come to be known as "The One" ran by me chasing a doe. I grabbed my M.A.D. Buck Growl and made three loud calls. It got his attention and he quickly closed the gap. I was able to get off the shot. He piled up just 50 yards away. The huge buck had 14 scorable points and measured 199 non-typical.






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# THE BRAG BOARD



**NICOLE STETTLER**  
**176 INCHES**  
CACHE CO., UT



**JEREMY KNIGHT**  
**190<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> INCHES**  
SIMPSON CO., KY



**JASON McCANLESS**  
**155 INCHES**  
TRINITY CO., CA



**HUNTER**  
**JIM LONG**



**SCORE**  
**175 INCHES**



**TAGGED IN**  
**HOUSTON CO., TX**



**RYAN CAMPBELL**  
**174 INCHES**  
MOFFAT CO., CO



**RANDY PLATZ**  
**165<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> INCHES**  
CHICKASAW CO., IA



# 9,224

**TOTAL** number of votes cast for the Online People's Choice award.

# 1152

**NUMBER** of votes cast for the winner, Mariah Ebert (p. 54).



**HUNTER** CHARLIE BUNDE     **SCORE** 192<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> IN.     **TAGGED IN** MAHNOMEN CO., MN



**HUNTER** DAVE BURKE     **SCORE** 176 INCHES     **TAGGED IN** FAIRFAX CO., VA



**JOE SCAVONE**  
163<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> INCHES  
SUFFOLK CO., NY



**WILL HARTZELL**  
150 INCHES  
FAUQUIER CO., VA



**MIKE CHAMBERLAIN**  
198 INCHES  
WASHINGTON CO., MN



**BODDALE TAYLOR**  
190 INCHES  
UINTA CO., WY



**BO DYLAKE**  
186<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> INCHES  
BOONE CO., IL



**JOEY CARAGATA**  
EST. 140 IN.  
SASKATCHEWAN







LAKE COUNTY, OREGON

# DOG MOUNTAIN MULEY

*It might have taken a long time to draw the tag, but this teen knew precisely how to make it count*

**A**FTER FIVE YEARS of putting in for the Oregon trophy youth hunt, 15-year-old Tandie Decker finally drew the muley tag she'd been dreaming about. The hunt fell during the week of Thanksgiving, and she set off for the southern reaches of the state with her dad and a family friend.

They hunted for two days in unpredictable conditions, with the weather snapping from blizzards to sunshine and back again. Tandie had the opportunity to take a respectable buck but decided to hold out. There were bigger deer around—they just

had to find them. The party zeroed in on an area with plenty of does and smaller bucks, and after exploring a few roads, they came across a cutoff. On a whim, her dad turned onto it. They spotted a coyote, and then her dad stopped and whispered, "Tandie, get ready!"

Shaking, Tandie walked to a better vantage point and settled her .300 WSM Savage on shooting sticks. The buck's body was tucked behind some vegetation at 213 yards, with just its neck exposed.

"I'd never taken a neck shot, but my dad told me it was a good buck, so I stayed calm and took the shot."

The bullet passed through its neck and struck the tree behind him. The buck jumped and circled, then halted, sputtering. Tandie crept closer, took a second shot, and dropped the muley where he stood. Her first-ever mule deer had a spread of 29  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches.

IT WORKED FOR ME...

**"I WON'T SHOOT ANY GAME ANIMAL UNLESS I'VE GOT MY SAVAGE. IT'S MY BABY."**

WILL COUNTY, ILLINOIS

# THE ONE-ACRE GIANT

*No one likes to hunt deer in tight quarters—unless there happens to be a brute living in them*



**WHILE WE HUNTERS** may all share the dream of one day taking a near-heart-attack-inducing buck, many of us would simply settle for having a great place to hunt. In whitetail-crazy, lease-centric states like Kansas and Illinois, however,

most folks can neither find nor afford to gain access to hunting land, let alone a big slice of whitetail paradise. Then there are hunters like 28-year-old Tim Nichols, who has taken the maxim "it's not where you hunt, but how you hunt it" to another level.

"The property we have to hunt in Will County is pretty small," says Nichols. "We have permission on 20 acres, but only 1 acre is hunt-able—the rest is fields"

On November 11, Tim and his dad, Robert, climbed into their stands more than

BUFFALO COUNTY, WISCONSIN

# WISCONSIN WONDER KID

*Most bowhunters aren't too picky when sizing up their first kill, but Kellen Binger didn't plan on settling for ordinary*

**Binger with his superb 10-point typical, taken with his Mathews Creed bow.**





an hour before sunrise. By 8 a.m., Tim had seen five bucks along with the object of their affection—a doe with an injured shoulder.

"Then," he says, "there *he* was—at 50 yards. Too far."

A drenching rainstorm suddenly hit and the doe, harassed by two spikes and the big buck, began working closer.

"She hobbled her way toward my ladder stand and he was right behind her," says Tim. "I grunted and he came to within 10 yards."

Shaking almost uncontrollably, Nichols had to wait for the buck to turn his head so that his drop tine would clear the sight window. Finally at full draw, Nichols released and the buck of a lifetime trotted off into the adjacent field.

"I was just sick," he says.



**Tim Nichols' huge non-typical whitetail dressed out at 265 pounds and net scored 199 inches.**

"My dad came over and we looked and looked—no arrow, no blood, a little bit of hair. And it's raining really hard."

Then Nichols returned with friend Joe Cochrane later in the afternoon and found the buck 1,000 yards from where he was hit. The double drop-tine monster was officially scored at 199 inches.

2014 season rolled around, the buck grew careless on a windy night in early October.

Despite his skepticism that any deer would be moving in such conditions, Binger stuck it out in his stand. As dusk fell, a noise that might've been a squirrel drew his attention.

"I couldn't believe my eyes," Binger says. "My mind was blown. I'd never seen a deer like that in my life."

Moose was browsing through the turnip plot in front of Binger, lingering behind a tree just in front of the stand. Ten minutes passed before the giant finally stepped into his shooting lane. Kellen squeezed his release and Moose tore out of the food plot—piling up 80 yards away. Not only did Binger manage to capture the entire hunt on film, but the 183-inch buck became his first bow kill.

A

**AS SOON AS** 16-year-old Kellen Binger discovered the trail camera photos of an enormous buck living on his hunting property, he set his sights on taking him. But a rare kidney condition kept Binger out of the woods and in clinical treatment for much of the 2013 season, and he missed his opportunity.

Fortunately the buck, nicknamed "Moose," survived the winter, despite a close encounter with another hunter on the property. Although he'd turned nocturnal by the time the

RICHLAND COUNTY, OHIO

# THE ALBATROSS

*Letting go of the past helps a hunter move forward*

**IF YOU'VE** bowhunted long enough, you know what gut-wrenching feels like. Dan Aquino first felt it after shoulder-shooting a mature 12-point buck years ago. He never recovered the deer, and for a time, he never quite recovered himself.

Upon moving to a new house in his home state of Ohio, the longtime bowhunter heard rumors of a massive drop-tine buck living nearby.

"I'd heard stories exactly like this before," Aquino says, "Some you believe, some you don't."

But during a late-October scouting trip the second season after he'd moved, he and his wife finally spotted the local legend on the hoof. After that, the buck only appeared on trail cameras, and only at night. But the rut ramped up and Aquino

**IT WORKED FOR ME...**

**BOW: ELITE Z28  
ARROW: VICTORY  
VFORCE V3  
SCENTS: WILD-  
LIFE RESEARCH  
MEGA-TARSAL  
PLUS**

finally got his chance on November 11. He spotted the big buck trailing a few does to his mock scrape and drew back as it stepped behind a knot of trees. Finally, the bruiser lowered his heavy head and moved slightly into the open. Aquino loosed his arrow, striking its heart and taking his first record-book deer. The whitetail officially scored 210 <sup>2</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches.

"I finally put the past behind me. To have done this, it's just a huge relief," Aquino says. "It was a moment I will never forget." 🌲🌲🌲

**Dan Aquino with the buck that helped him lay his demons to rest for good.**





# Prairie Wings

GOOD FRIENDS, EAGER DOGS,  
AND WILD BIRDS MEET UNDER THE  
WIDE SKIES OF EASTERN MONTANA

BY ANDREW MCKEAN : PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL BUCKLEY







I DON'T RECALL if the idea started as a lost bet or an idle boast, but somewhere along the way it turned into an invitation to a group of friends: Come to my home in eastern Montana in October. Bring your dogs, your shotguns, and your appetite. And your sleeping bags. We will camp, I said, and hunt pheasants and prairie grouse, and we'll sleep in a wall tent tucked under the cottonwoods.

I never expected the idea to stick, but last year the crew arrived: Frank and his son flew in from Pennsylvania; Mike came from Illinois; Warren brought his block-headed Lab, Spencer, and pulled a camper all the way from Florida; Steve came from Missoula, on the other side of Montana, with his young Lab, Rio; and photographer Bill Buckley came up from Bozeman. Everyone brought guns, and the sort of enthusiasm that borders on giddiness. Here's a chronicle of our week together in bird camp.



➤ The trip was timed for Montana's pheasant opener, but unseasonably warm weather kept local ducks in the area, providing bonus wingshooting.

● **right**  
The crew heads to a field edge to shoot ducks over a single spinning-wing decoy. The mixed bag included teal, gadwalls, and wood ducks, but by far the most frequent fliers were mosquitoes.

● **middle**  
My Lab, Willow, retrieves a green-wing teal. No eastern Montana upland hunt is complete without prairie grouse. We headed to the open prairie for brush-loving sharpshooters.

● **bottom**  
I make a case for a long walk across the shortgrass prairie. The rest of the crew, tired and thirsty after a previous birdless hike, wasn't buying my pitch. Even Willow was doing her best to ignore me.

● **opposite**  
Mike Stock positions pheasant hunters while Rio checks out the rooster on his strap.



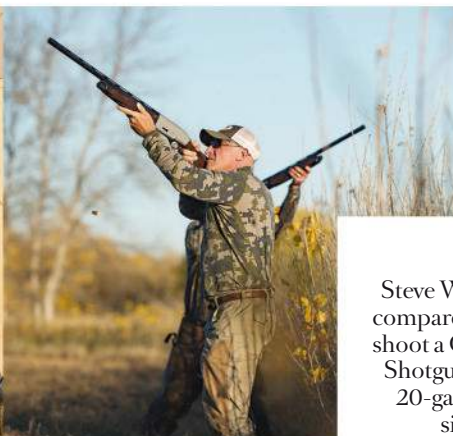












#### **opposite**

Steve Wagner and I compare shotguns. I shoot a Connecticut Shotgun Company 20-gauge side-by-side; Wagner, a Beretta A390 semi-auto 12-gauge Ducks Unlimited banquet gun he found in a Montana pawn shop.

#### **top left**

A midafternoon break in front of the canvas wall tent that served as cook shack, bunkhouse, and headquarters for the hunt.

#### **top right**

Warren Sands swings on a duck approaching from behind the decoy.

#### **left**

Evenings were for recovery around the fire—for dogs and hunters alike.

#### **bottom left**

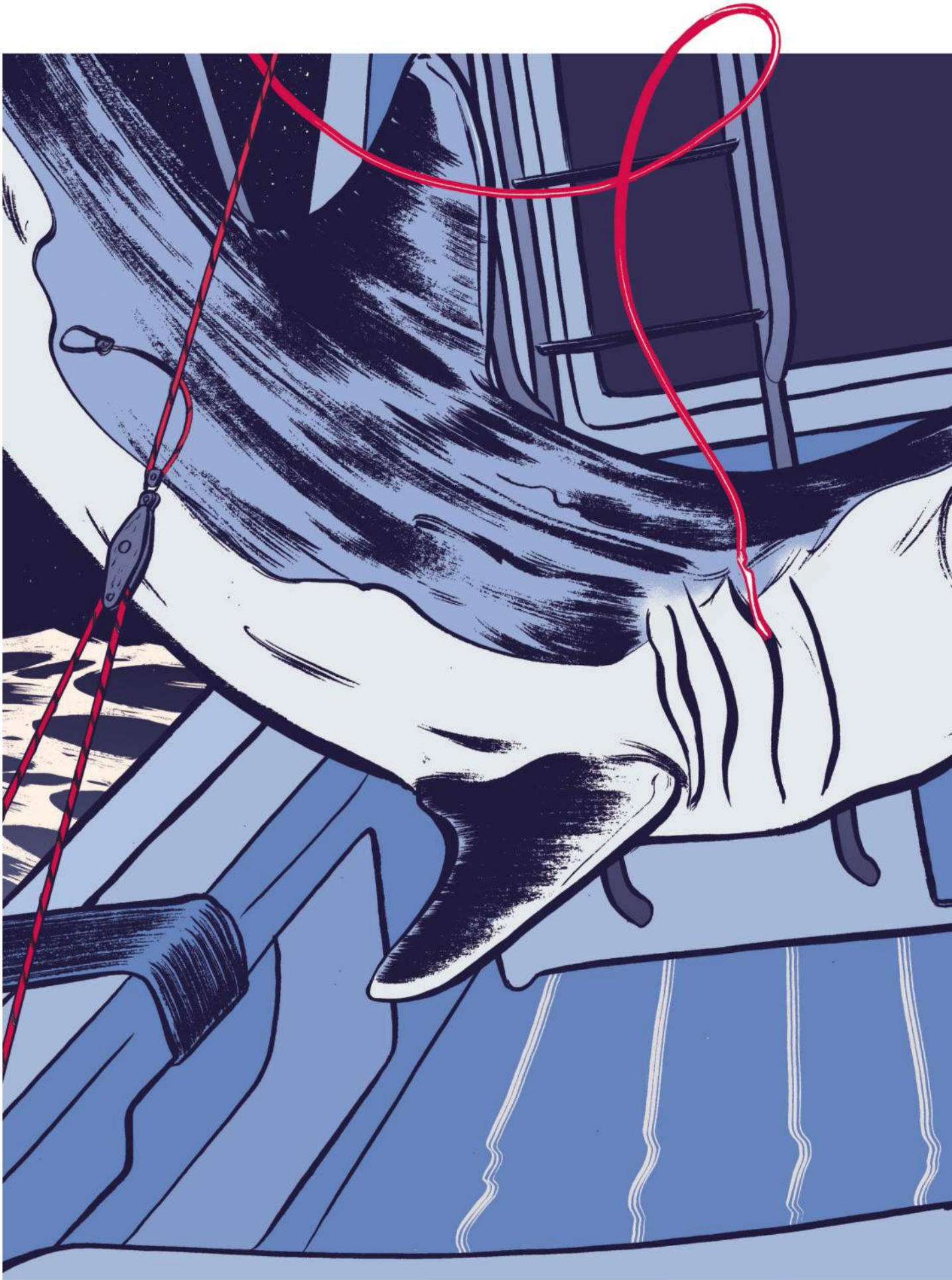
Sands and a worn-down Spencer with a rooster.

#### **bottom right**

Hunting pheasants in the crop-rich bottomland of Montana's Milk River means negotiating obstacles like irrigation ditches.











# THE DEVIL FISH

IT TAKES A CERTAIN TYPE OF ANGLER TO INTENTIONALLY TARGET THE OCEAN'S MOST DANGEROUS PREDATORS. SOMETIMES THE FISHERMAN WINS THE ENCOUNTER, SOMETIMES THE SHARK DOES. WHATEVER THE OUTCOME, THE STORIES ENDURE

BY **JAMES HALL**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **TIGER BASTARD**

**E**VER CRAP YOUR PANTS? Not a stomach-bug reaction, but out of simple fear? No need to answer aloud. But if you have, then you might want to prepare yourself before reading the following tales, as they will certainly bring back that churning feeling in your gut.





THESE ALMOST UNBELIEVABLE shark stories are from real captains who were lucky enough to walk away mostly unscathed. Their accounts are just a sampling of true events that have played out on the oceans lapping at our coastlines. We aren't trying to scare you off the water. We just want to give you a bit of a heads-up for the next time you go offshore.

### MAKO GONE WILD

The night was still and all the men were asleep save one. Devlin Roussel had drawn the short stick and had the midnight watch. He was the youngest angler aboard the Sportfisherman, and his grandfather, captain of the 52-footer, wasn't about to forfeit sleep.

"We were tied to a buoy about 60 miles off the coast of Grand Isle, Louisiana. I was bored to death, so I figured I'd try and catch some tuna while the guys were sleeping," says Roussel of that summer night in 1986.

"I started chumming with some trash fish we had caught. About 2 a.m., I heard something crash into the port outrigger, which was stowed up. I looked and saw a 200-pound mako shark coming down into the boat with the red outrigger halyard stuck in its gill," Roussel says.

Evidently, the shark charged the chum slick and then free-jumped almost 6 feet into the air, colliding with the outrigger setup.

"Had that fish not hit the outrigger, it would have crashed directly into the cabin," he says. "As it fell into the boat, the halyard broke, dropping the fish in the cockpit—fully alive."

The 6½-foot-long shark went ballistic.

"We had recently replaced the fighting chair and the tackle station. So, of course, the first thing the shark bites is the fighting chair. It ripped that thing to shreds in a matter of seconds. Then it moved to the tackle station and, between biting the wood and pummeling it with its tail, turned it into a pile of splinters."

By that time, Roussel's grandfather and the rest of the crew were awake from the impact of the 200-plus-pound fish landing in the boat.

"My grandfather walked out with a pistol. At the sight of the shark and its trail of devastation, my grandfather aimed the gun at the fish. But he quickly reconsidered. We didn't need a hole in the boat. Instead, we grabbed a couple of heavy-duty gaffs and eventually pinned the shark against the corner of the boat near the marlin door. As the shark latched on to one of the steel gaffs, bending

it like a spoon, I grabbed a knife and started stabbing it. That didn't go over too well," says Roussel. The shark responded by releasing its hold on the gaff, doubling around and nearly catching Roussel's ankle.

After wrestling with the creature for 20 minutes, the crew was finally able to open the marlin door and push the shark back into the ocean.

"It was the longest 20 minutes of my life. That mako ended our fishing trip. We had to head back to the boatyard the next morning. When all was said and done, that fish caused \$15,000 worth of damage. The whole cockpit had to be rebuilt."

### FACE-TO-FACE

It was a gray morning off the coast of Point Judith, Rhode Island, on July 27, 1991, when Capt. Joe Pagano, his cousin Vinnie Cleri, and friend Steve Daniels spotted what appeared to be an overturned boat floating in the distance. The trio was only a couple of miles offshore and decided to investigate.

The boat turned out to be a 35-foot-long fin-back whale, freshly dead, leaking fluids for hundreds of yards. This slick had attracted an apex predator, its presence announced by 4-foot-wide chomp marks in the side of the carcass.

"We knew there was a big shark feeding on that whale," says Pagano, "but we had no idea how big."

The captain was marking the fish on his depth sounder when he saw an enormous hook on the screen. Something huge was near the bottom in 60 feet of water.

"We rigged up a rod with 180-pound mono and a doubled wire leader, grabbed the biggest tuna hook we had onboard, a 14/0, and drifted some baits by the carcass," Pagano says.

No dice.

"Then we figured we should match the hatch, so we pulled up to the whale and Vinnie started cutting a chunk of meat off the carcass. All of a sudden, he stepped back breathless. Couldn't say a word."

While sawing off a piece of bait, Cleri had seen the shark—a great white of immense proportions. It surfaced just on the other side of the whale from where Cleri was precariously leaning over the side of the boat. He saw its coal black eyes. He saw its extended jaws full of serrated teeth wider than steak knives.

"He said this thing was bigger than we could handle. It really, really scared him. And he wouldn't get next to the edge of the boat again," says Pagano.

Eventually, they removed a 5-pound slab of blubber and attached it to the hook. (This was several years before using whale blubber for bait and intentionally fishing for great whites





became illegal.) It took only five minutes for it to get bit.

"We let it run for almost a minute before we set the hook, which to this fish must have felt like a fly landing on your arm."

The anglers expected the fish to freak out once they applied pressure, but it didn't. The giant beast kept a slow and steady pace, almost indifferent to the annoyance of the anglers connected to it.

"We tightened the drag down as much as we dared, and basically reeled the boat to the shark," Pagano explains.

Perhaps the most amazing part of this tale is that Pagano was not fishing from a huge vessel. His boat, the *Osprey*, was a simple 23-foot cuddy cabin cruiser. When the shark first surfaced, its length seemed to nearly equal that of the boat. The shark's girth was nearly 10 feet.

After two and a half hours of being towed by the shark, the immense beast regurgitated enormous chunks of whale meat all the while, the three men had the great white boatside.

"We harpooned it, and it surged under the boat. Unfortunately, the harpoon line got caught in the prop. So, we harpooned it again and hand-lined it tight to the boat." With Cleri holding his legs, Capt. Pagano was lowered head-first toward the water. His face was just inches from the surface, his elbows beneath the water untangling the mess, the huge shark idling within spitting distance.

Finally, the prop was freed and the three men tail-roped the shark. The battle was over. At the dock, the fish was measured and weighed by biologists: 15 feet 6 inches; 2,909 pounds. At the time, it might have been the largest fish ever caught by rod and reel.

### AN INCH FROM DEATH

Capt. Steve Quinlan and his fishing partner were chumming off the Los Angeles coast when the monster shark first made its presence known. It was June 2006, the beginning of mako shark season, and the pair was chumming without a single baited line out, hoping to bring a beast up from the depths.



**"BACK HOME WE GOT  
A TAXIDERMIST MAN. HE GONNA  
HAVE A HEART ATTACK WHEN  
HE SEE WHAT I BRUNG HIM."**

—QUINT, FROM *JAWS*



"When I target big mako sharks, I don't want to fool with bycatch or small sharks. So, until I see a big fish moving into the chum slick, the baits stay in the boat," Quinlan explains.

And by seeing a fish, he means seeing signs of an incoming giant. The seagulls tip him off.

"Seagulls land in the chum and pick off small pieces floating on the water. You can have an island of seagulls next to your boat if you chum long enough."

After four hours of chumming, the raft of birds floating adjacent to his 29-foot Pro Line was significant—until the gull farthest back took flight. Then a couple more followed. And at once, a violent wave of flying, white, squawking gulls lifted and dispersed, completely leaving the area.

"When a big shark comes in, the seagulls get the hell out of Dodge," says Quinlan. "They don't want to become a meal."

As the mako cruised toward the boat (they come in at 8 to 9 knots), it looked like a submarine about to surface, with water being pushed aside by the sheer girth of the fish. Then the tip of the dorsal fin broke the water. And all at once, the shark took form, just feet behind the boat. The pair of anglers immediately tossed out big hunks of tuna flesh to put the predator in a feeding mood.

"Once we saw her eat, we pitched our baits and she ate," Quinlan says.

The fight was not abnormal for a fish of nearly 500 pounds and an estimated 9 ½ feet long. It took about an hour and a half for the pair to get the shark boatside. And that's when everything went crazy.

"I had a flying gaff that had about 12 inches between the point and the barb, which means you really have to penetrate a fish to sink the barb in. Well, I hit her as hard as I could. The problem was, makos are very sensitive and flinch as soon as they feel that gaff point, so I didn't sink it past the barb."

When Quinlan went to push it in farther, the shark went nuts. Going from a horizontal position adjacent to the boat's gunnel to perfectly vertical with one swipe of its tail, the mako flew out of the water toward the captain.

"Before I could react, I had a face full of shark teeth. I could smell her breath. I saw rancid meat between the rows of her jagged teeth. She snapped her jaws shut within an inch of my face," Quinlan says.

He tried once more to secure the gaff, and the shark again attacked.

"The second time she came at us, she bit the side of the boat so hard it almost knocked us over. Her top teeth lodged in the rub rail, her bottom teeth penetrated not only the gel coat on the bottom of the boat, but also cracked the fiberglass!" the captain says.

With one final push, the barb found home and the shark was contained.

"Looking back, I was really lucky. Had I been bent over a little more, she would have had me. It was a humbling experience."

Quinlan still guides for trophy makos, but he avoids potential gaffing mayhem by practicing catch-and-release. ▲▲▲





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# HUNTING INSIDER

## TIP

Carry a high-pitched predator call on mule deer hunts. At mid-day, when bucks are bedded in shade or dense cover, blow the call to get them on their feet.



DONALD M. JONES

A mature muley buck keeps close tabs on a doe in the Lolo National Forest in western Montana.

## CRACK THE CODE

HOW TO KILL A TROPHY MULE DEER ON PUBLIC LAND  
BY ARAM VON BENEDIKT



A

A MATURE PUBLIC-LAND mule deer buck is arguably the most challenging trophy animal to harvest in the U.S. Habitat encroachment, fire suppression, and pressure from predators have resulted in dwindling deer numbers in recent years. Burgeoning hunter numbers mean fierce competition for permits, and modern technology (trail cams, satellite imagery, smart-phone apps) turns every tech-savvy hunter into an expert. The days of buying an over-the-counter permit in a good area, pulling on a wool shirt, and pushing draws in search of a monster buck are gone. So what's a hunter without a spare few thousand dollars to do?



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Once you've identified a likely big-buck area, determine whether the deer will hold there or migrate.



### RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

► First, let's identify what it takes to grow a monster mule deer. The most important ingredient is good genetics. Without them, a deer just does not have the ability to grow a trophy-class rack. I could rant on the subject for the entire length of this article, but I'll leave it at that.

Second, bucks need proper nutrition, both from food and minerals. Food is somewhat weather-dependent, and can influence antler growth from year to year. Minerals are found in certain soils but are also sometimes available to deer by way of local ranching operations and the supplements they set out for livestock.

Mule bucks also need time to grow, which is something they rarely get. A mule deer buck typically grows his biggest antlers during his sixth, seventh, and eighth years. The vast majority of bucks on public land (where most mule deer live) are killed during their first three years. As a result, no matter how perfect the genetics and food conditions are, they never get the chance to fulfill their antler potential.

So how does one get a chance at a whopper muley buck? It takes time, dedication, and effort.

### THE THREE-STEP PLAN

► The first step is research. Study state big-game record books and speak with state biologists to find units where big bucks are routinely harvested.

Once you've narrowed your search a bit, start your digital scout-

ing. Study potential units via Google Earth. This incredibly useful tool enables you to do all of your preliminary scouting remotely. Find the honey holes where big bucks live. This is a needle-in-a-haystack proposition, so be meticulous. Identify areas that no one else is hunting. This could be a small, super-remote canyon with a tiny seep and miles of desert protecting it. It might be an incredibly vertical area where most hunters fear to go. Or it could be a landlocked area where public land meets private agriculture. Without exception, they will be very hard to get to. They will have water, necessary food, and a barrier of terrain, distance, or private land rebuffing access from the nearest road. That's what allows the bucks that live there to survive to maturity.

Another thing to consider is whether the deer live there year-round or migrate. If they migrate, determine where they will be during hunting season.

The third step is on-site scouting. Once you have located potentially good areas via Google Earth, you need to put boots on the ground. The best time to do this (except in places where deer migrate before the season) is midsummer, when bucks sport enough antler growth that you can estimate their potential.

The best evidence that monster muleys inhabit an area is visual confirmation. Find elevated vantage points and glass meticulously. During warm, midday hours (when deer aren't moving), hike draws, check water sources, and search ridgeline saddles and benches for big-buck sign. If you are really lucky, you might turn up a shed antler or two. If you find tracks, follow them a mile or so. This will show you what the buck likes to eat, how he prefers to travel, and maybe where he waters. If you can get inside a big buck's head now, you'll be that much closer to a lethal encounter during hunting season.



### Essential Scouting Equipment

**OPTICS:** A quality 10X binocular and a lightweight 15-45X spotting scope and tripod are ideal.

**FOOTWEAR:** Lightweight, comfortable hunting or hiking boots. Break them in ahead of time.

**MAPS:** Detailed 7.5-minute topo maps of the area can

be found at any number of mapping websites.

**SUNSCREEN:** Many mule deer live in sunny, high-elevation areas. Don't get roasted!

**DAY PACK:** Choose a comfortable one that will easily carry all of your gear and water.





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HUNTING INSIDER  
AFTER THE SHOT

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## CAPE AND MEAT PRESERVATION

TIPS FOR KEEPING BACKCOUNTRY GAME FRESH AFTER THE KILL BY TYLER FREEL



any backcountry hunter will tell you that getting an animal down is often the easiest part of the hunt. After the shot, the clock starts ticking, and you're often miles from the truck or airstrip. It's a classic catch-22: Both the cape for a mount and the meat are the object of your hunt, but by going so far into the wilderness to get them, you risk losing one or the

other on the way out. It can be very difficult to keep both from spoiling, especially in warm weather early in the season. Here are several things you can do to increase the odds of saving both.

### MAINTAIN THE MEAT

The key is to keep it dry. Wet meat breeds bacteria, which can taint meat quickly in warm weather. The first step is to clean the animal quickly and lay out the meat to cool before packing it in a game bag. If pieces of warm meat are packed together immediately, the heat can't dissipate.

One trick to cooling meat in a hurry, or keeping it cool in hot weather, is to put it in garbage bags, seal the bags, and submerge them in a cold creek. This works great, but be sure to get the meat out of the plastic bags immediately after removing

them from the water.

Make sure to remove meat from your pack if you stop for the night. I like to lay it out on cold rocks next to a creek. If I need to stash it during the daytime, I'll find a patch of brush or a shaded hole to store it in.

One thing I definitely recommend is a citric-acid-based meat-preserving liquid, such as Game Saver. When sprayed or wiped on meat, it causes the meat to crust and repels insects.

### KEEP THE CAPE

The cape can quickly begin to slip if it's not taken care of properly. For sheep, my favorite thing to

do is keep it submerged in a cold creek at all times when I'm not packing it. The water where I hunt is cold enough to keep the cape from spoiling, and it washes all the blood out. Again, do not leave it in the sun or let it get hot when it's not in the water.

Some situations don't allow for the creek treatment, but there are still a couple of things you can do. If you know how to properly flesh and turn ears and lips, salt is

the classic solution. Use enough so that every millimeter of the skin is coated, fold it skin-to-skin, and roll it up. When you stop at night, unroll it and set it in a cool place so the moisture that the salt draws out can evaporate.

Since most field conditions don't allow for proper fleshing, I pack a small bottle of Stop Rot to coat the skin. The clear liquid inhibits bacterial growth and will make the skin last much longer.

## Best Backcountry Blade

Over my years of hunting out of a backpack, I've come to favor one knife for all of my game-processing chores: the Havalon Piranta (\$47; [havalon.com](http://havalon.com)). This knife is relatively cheap and very lightweight, and the replaceable blades (also inexpensive) make carrying a sharpening stone unnecessary. It is great for skinning, caping, and cutting up game. I have taken care of brown bears, grizzly bears, black bears, moose, caribou, wolves, wolverines, deer, and Dall sheep with this one little knife. It's lightweight, and if you get one with an orange handle, it'll be easy to find if you set it down.







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## HUNTING INSIDER

### WHITETAILS



Filling your doe tags early in the season reduces herd stress.

## DOE DILEMMA

TARGETING ANTLERLESS DEER: WHICH ONES, HOW MANY, AND WHEN? **BY TONY HANSEN**



**FROM STATE TO STATE**, and sometimes even county to county, America's hunters tend to not agree on very much. However, we seem to be in agreement that deer numbers across the board aren't what they were just a few seasons ago. In some places, we have fewer antlerless tags to fill. But where antlerless

tags are still readily available, hunters wonder if they should continue with their established doe management strategy.

"There's a rule of thumb that if you want to maintain the number of deer in a population, you need to take two thirds of adult does each year. If you want to grow the herd, you take fewer," says QDMA biologist Kip Adams says.

"In some areas, it might be advisable to scale back on doe harvests. Does that mean that you shouldn't target any antlerless deer at all? No," says Adams. "If populations are at the desired levels, you want to keep them there. And the way to do that is by continuing to harvest antlerless deer in a sensible manner."

### PICK THE RIGHT DOE

■ What if you hunt in an area where deer numbers are down? How many does should you take? Are there specific antlerless deer that should be targeted? If so, when do you target them?

"If you go from taking 10 does a year to five, there probably isn't going to be a big change in your strategy," Adams says. "Take the does that offer the best opportunity. I'm a big proponent of taking antlerless deer as early in the season as possible. It reduces the overall stress on the population and the food sources."

"It also means that following that disturbance, bucks will have an opportunity to calm down well before the rut, and I can focus on hunting them. Some guys think that if you have all the does during the rut, you'll have all the bucks. Study after study has proven that simply isn't true."

For hunters who feel the need to scale back on antlerless harvests in an effort to regrow deer populations, Adams recommends targeting young deer.

"If you are trying to rebuild a population, I think it makes a lot of sense to protect your best fawn-producing deer. And those are adult does. This makes sense particularly in areas with high levels of predation. Adult does are better at protecting fawns from coyotes than yearling does are. So if you are going to greatly scale back your antlerless harvest but still want to take a few does, those young ones are the ones to take."



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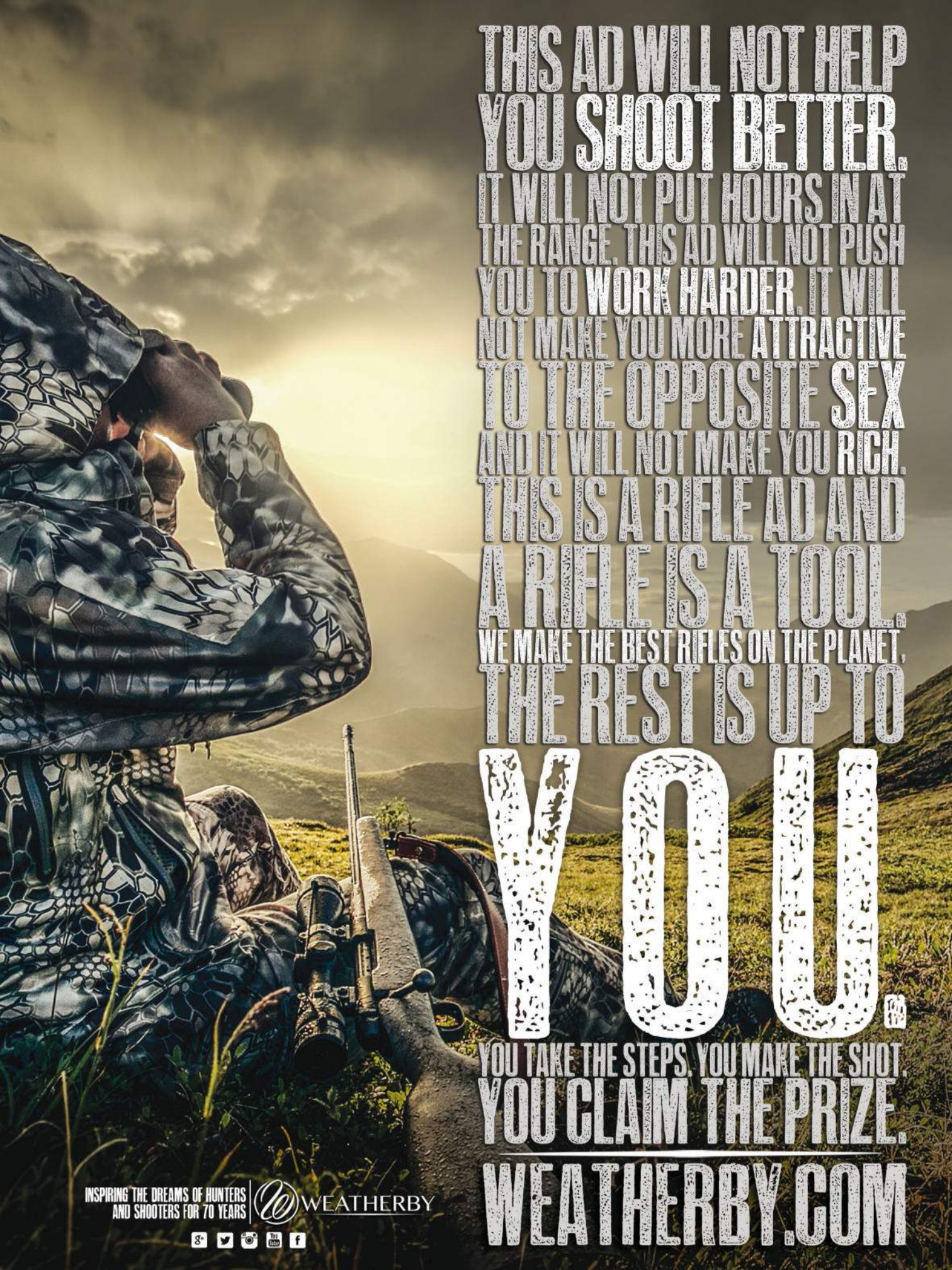


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## BRACCO ITALIANO

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** Bracco

**ORIGIN:** Italy

**AVERAGE BUILD:** 21½ to 26½ inches tall; 55 to 88 pounds.

**OVERVIEW:** Braccos are popular gun dogs in Europe, and with recognition by the North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association and the United Kennel Club in the U.S., they are experiencing a rise in popularity here. Heavy-boned, with lanky legs and large feet, Braccos are pointing dogs that are also expected to retrieve to hand. Strong and energetic, they are slow to mature and can be stubborn. Trainers should be patient and expect to take a couple of seasons to finish the dog (and that's with ample training time during the off-season), and should rely more on positive behavior modification than force training. When finished, the Bracco's superb nose, staunch point, and reliable delivery will make the time investment worthwhile.



## CATAHOULA LEOPARD DOG

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** Louisiana Catahoula Leopard Dog, Catahoula Hound, Catahoula Hog Dog

**ORIGIN:** United States (Louisiana)

**AVERAGE BUILD:** 20 to 26 inches tall; 40 to 90 pounds, with females tending to be smaller.

**OVERVIEW:** Not every breed descends from Europe—the Catahoula is as American as it gets. Not only is it the state dog of Louisiana, it was possibly bred by Native Americans when they crossed their dogs with those brought by Hernando De Soto. Catahoulas are big-game dogs that have made their name tracking and baying bayou hogs. They're also used for bears, mountain lions, raccoons, and squirrels, and they excel at trailing wounded deer. Dominant with other dogs and protective of their domain, they are family dogs, requiring daily interaction with their people, and they will earnestly protect the children in their family.



# DOGS ON THE RISE

EVERY BREED OF WORKING DOG KNOWN TO MAN WAS DEVELOPED TO FULFILL A SPECIFIC NEED, AND HUNTING WAS A PRIMARY DRIVER IN THE BIRTH OF MANY BREEDS. PEOPLE CONTINUE TO DEVELOP BREEDS TO ACCOMPLISH SPECIFIC TASKS, THOUGH, AND SOME OF THESE LESSER-KNOWN VARIETIES COULD AID YOU ON YOUR HUNTS **BY BRIAN LYNN**

## DRENTSCHE PATRIJSHOND

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** Dutch Partridge Dog, Drent

**ORIGIN:** The Netherlands

**AVERAGE BUILD:** 21½ to 25 inches tall; 40 to 65 pounds.

**OVERVIEW:** Resembling a springer spaniel in build, coloring, and markings, Drents are pointing dogs that work close to the gun. They can handle varied terrain and prey, from high-desert chukar to thick-timber grouse. They have a strong desire to retrieve and will hunt for downed game and deliver it to hand. Because of this, Drents can pull double duty as waterfowl dogs too. Their coats are dense, but not overly long. In terms of temperament, Drents are known to be more relaxed in the home than many hunting breeds, are very loyal, and are excellent around kids.



## DEUTSCHER WACHTELHUND

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** German Spaniel, German Quail Dog

**ORIGIN:** Germany

**AVERAGE BUILD:** 18 to 21 inches at the shoulder; 40 to 55 pounds.

**OVERVIEW:** These dogs are solid—well boned and muscled. Similar in appearance and size to the Drent and related to the Small Münsterländer, the wachtelhund is a versatile dog that excels at flushing upland game, though it was bred to do it all: flush birds, retrieve waterfowl, and track furred animals such as rabbits and foxes. Even larger game, such as stag and boar, are potential targets for this all-purpose breed. In parts of Canada, they are used to track and flush black bears. Strict breeding criteria in Germany (only hunters are allowed to own them) have followed the wachtelhunds to the U.S.





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Seams where young timber abuts old timber provide grouse both good cover and food.



## RUFF STUFF

HOW TO FIND MORE GROUSE OFF THE BEATEN PATH **BY TOM CARPENTER**



**M**any grouse hunters follow logging trails and tote roads in search of birds almost exclusively. It's a decent enough strategy: exceedingly simple, occasionally productive, and you never get lost. But even in the most remote areas, a convenient corridor through the woods invites every other grouse hunter to take that stroll, too. If your competition isn't hunting there when you arrive, they've either bagged the birds already or pushed them back off the path.

To shoot more ruffed grouse, get back into the thick places where the birds live, but don't wander aimlessly through the timber, tangles, and brush. Ruffs are creatures of the edges—the kinds of places where cover types come together.

So turn on your GPS, get off those overhunted trails, and work these seams, edges, and transition zones to find more birds.

### MARSH ADJACENT TO TIMBER

As young grouse disperse from their broodmates, the traveling birds come up against open areas such as large marshes. This concentrates birds, as does the abundance of berries, greens, and underbrush (such as gray dogwood), all of which are the result of the extra sunlight and ample moisture. It makes for an ideal seam of grouse habitat.

### YOUNG TIMBER ADJACENT TO MATURE TIMBER

The line between young aspen timber with broomstick- to baseball bat-sized trunks and mature timber offers grouse the best of two worlds: Traditional hiding cover during the day and bigger trees for night-

time roosting. If the larger trees are oaks, all the better—grouse love eating acorns.

### TAG ALDERS ADJACENT TO TIMBER

Grouse use tag alder cover far out of proportion to its availability. Tag alders grow on wet and moist ground. The trunk density and overhead canopy of branches make grouse feel safe, plus the birds feed on the catkins. Work back and forth between the tag alders and timber to find what cover the birds are using that day.

### EVERGREENS ADJACENT TO HARDWOODS

Grouse love firs, hemlocks, spruces, and pines for daytime cover, and for excellent year-round roosting in the needled boughs. The cover is superb, but ruffs can't survive in evergreens exclusively.

Look for zones where conifers butt up to and even mix



Edges between marshes and timber will tend to concentrate ruffs.



with hardwoods such as aspen, oak, and birch.

#### CROP FIELDS OR PASTURE ADJACENT TO TIMBER

Plenty of grouse live in areas that mix farmland with woodland. Ruffs are quick to take advantage of crop fields (mainly corn) for cover and feeding. The edge between a corn stubble field and the thickly shrubbed edge of a woodlot is ideal for an early-morning or late-afternoon hunt, when the birds are working toward or coming back from the grain. Cow pastures replicate the meadow openings grouse like in traditional habitat, and offer similar edge opportunities with witch hazel, plum brush, and crabapple trees.

#### CREEK CORRIDORS

Any creek, brook, or stream coursing through the woods serves as a grouse magnet. These moist corridors offer berry-producing shrubs and tag

alders, and that attracts birds all fall. On warm and/or windy days, the birds will be down low along the water. On cooler days, and sunny midmornings and afternoons, look for grouse in adjacent uplands.

#### STONE WALLS AND FENCES

Old stone walls and barbed wire fences offer more than a convenient line to follow: These man-made structures often lead to old homesteads, brook crossings, grown-over fields and pastures, abandoned orchards, and other forgotten places that attract grouse.

#### DOGWOOD SEAMS

Across their range, ruffed grouse love to eat dogwood berries. Dogwood often grows in elongated patches in sunny spots. Dogwood isn't thorny, but it's hard to walk through and get off a shot in. Hunt the edges. If you have a dog, send it in to find the birds.

DONALD M. JONES

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Dogless hunters can have great success on pheasants if they adhere to the birds' routine.



# SOLO ROOSTERS

BAG A LIMIT OF PHEASANTS ALL ON YOUR OWN, EVEN WITHOUT A DOG **BY RON SPOMER**

**T**he best way to succeed at hunting pheasants is to join forces with a properly trained bird dog. The second best way is by yourself, without a dog. Contrary to conventional wisdom, bagging ringnecks with no help other than that of your boots, gun, and shells isn't just possible, it's amazingly effective. I urge everyone to hunt with a dog, and I do so myself whenever I can. But sometimes I just can't, and yet I get my roosters anyway. Bowser's biggest boost to your bag comes in the form of retrievers. Yes, pointers and flushers can probably locate more birds than you could alone, but their real contribution is fetching dead and crippled birds from the weeds. You can't beat four legs and a canine nose for that. Therefore, here are three things you must do when you're dogless in Dakota.

## THE THREE COMMANDMENTS OF GOING SOLO

**1. SHOOT STRAIGHT. 2. SHOOT ONE BIRD** at a time and only one bird at a time. **3. WHEN YOU KNOCK A BIRD DOWN**, glue your eyes on the spot where it fell, open the chamber of your gun to make it perfectly safe, and run to the crash site. Search diligently. Wing-tipped roosters are capable of evading even the best dogs, but if you race right to the spot, you'll usually find your bird. Stop and listen. Often you'll hear it flapping, rustling, or squirming into the dried vegetation. Jump on it.

Promise to do those three things and I'll tell you the seven secrets for finding pheasants without canine assistance.

**1 WALK SOFTLY AND CARRY A BIG STICK.** Actually, a 20- or 28-gauge will do, though most rooster hunters prefer a 12-gauge. Regardless, the key is to be as quiet as possible. You may walk slowly or quickly, but walk into the wind or across it if possible. A 5 to 15 mph breeze is perfect for rustling vegetation and providing auditory cover. By the time Mr. Longtail realizes

you're close, it's too late. He panics, he flies, he dies.

**2 KNOW THEIR ROUTINES.** Pheasants wake at dawn, preen for a bit, then walk or fly to breakfast—usually in a grain field. They'll eat for an hour or two before moving into loafing cover. This could border the feed field or be a half mile away, but it will be dense and undisturbed. An hour or two before sunset, they'll make another grocery run, fill their crops, and head to roosting cover, often in surprisingly short grass in expansive fields.

**3 THINK AND STRATEGIZE.** If hunting pressure has been heavy in the area, feeding and loafing schedules might be off. Other hunters could bump birds out of feed fields early. Regular traffic through dense cover can encourage birds to hide in odd places, like small clumps of weeds in a barren field. Observe, keep an open mind, and take the road less traveled.

**4 ATTACK HUGE FIELDS.** Vast chunks of CRP grass don't require an army to flush effectively. Walk their edges 10 to

30 yards in. Zigzag now and then, pushing right to the barren edge. Be ready at all corners. Birds often run there, then hold and panic. Ignore the wild flushers—one or more will hold tight. That's the one with your name on it.

**5 MAINTAIN THE PERIMETER.** Walk the remaining edges of that big field, staying within shotgun range of the fringe. Persistence unnerves birds. They'll eventually give up and take to the air.

**6 HIT THE MIDDLE.** After you've circumnavigated a big field, cut across it diagonally. This course will put you right through a host of crafty birds that have huddled in the center.

**7 SNEAK UP ON THEM.** As the evening feeding session nears, birds begin easing toward the edge of the dining room. An hour before sunset, 98 percent of any field's pheasants could be sitting within 20 yards of the edge between dense cover and the smorgasbord. If you stay just far enough into the grass so that it blocks their view of your approach, you should be able to walk right up and say "surprise."



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Deep-red blood suggests a muscle shot—but is it heart or shoulder?

# UNRAVELING THE BLOOD TRAIL

NO HUNTER EVER WANTS TO LOSE AN ANIMAL, SO TAKE THE PROPER STEPS TO ENSURE A CLEAN KILL AND A QUICK RECOVERY **BY BRAD FITZPATRICK**

**F**ew things in hunting are more frustrating than losing an injured animal. For most, an animal is “lost” when the blood trail dries up and they are left to search in vain for the next clue to the animal’s direction of travel. In reality, losing the blood trail marks the end of a long series of events that can include a bad shot, improper bullet or broadhead performance, flushing injured game from its bed, overlooking clues regarding the type of injury, and so forth. Quite often it is only at the end of an empty blood trail that we recognize the mistakes that were made, and at that point it’s too late to fix the problem.

In many cases, hunters can prevent the loss of injured game from happening through preparation and knowledge. You can’t guarantee that every shot you take will result in a quick, clean kill, but you can stack the odds in your favor by focusing on these key elements before, during, and after you take the shot.

## BEFORE THE SHOT

### ► PRACTICE PROPER SHOT

**PLACEMENT:** This seems axiomatic, but too many hunters spend too little time at the range prior to the season. You must build the confidence required to make a lethal shot when the opportunity presents itself. It’s fine to sight-in your firearm or bow on a bullseye target, but the bulk of your practice should be on targets that resemble your quarry.

### ► KNOW YOUR BULLET OR

**BROADHEAD:** Caliber or draw weight is not the only factor that affects the lethality of your implement. You need to know how it will perform on game. When you find what works, stick with it. Today’s crop of new bullets and broadheads are better than ever, but take the time to ensure that they will work properly for you.

**► KNOW THE RANGE:** Most hunters practice at very specific ranges and know how their weapon will perform at that distance. It is important, therefore, to know exactly how far away your game is when you plan to make the shot. A rangefinder is essential, but in many cases (particularly for bowhunters), you might not have time to range your quarry in the seconds before a shot. Spend time ranging various things from your stand or hide and use those visual keys to know how far away the game is when it appears. Be prepared to make a quick shot, but know your limits. If the quarry is outside that range, it’s off-limits.

### ► PACK THE ESSENTIALS:

Reflective tape is inexpensive and a great aid in marking a trail, so you need to have some in your pack. It allows you to visualize the animal’s flight path and serves as a reference on the trail, plus it’s a much better method than dropping gloves and gear along the track. If you do need to call in extra help, you’ll be able to get back on the trail immediately once the cavalry arrives.

**► CLEAR THE DEBRIS:** When you select your stand location, take

the time to clear shooting lanes properly, both while you’re on the ground and after climbing into the stand. Many wounded animals are lost because an undetected obstacle causes the bullet or arrow to veer off course. Walk down your shooting lanes and clear out anything that could potentially cause a miss.

## AT THE SHOT

**► BREATHE PROPERLY:** During an intense encounter, physical reactions to stress can limit your ability to respond appropriately. One element to maintaining composure is controlled breathing. Heightened anxiety causes rapid, shallow breathing, which will compromise your ability to make a clean shot. Learn to control your breathing when you shoot. Take deep, slow breaths and focus on your target. This small step often means the difference between an accurate shot and a wounded animal.

**► GATHER INTEL:** When you shoot at game, you might only have a second or two to gather information about the shot and the animal’s direction of travel. If it runs, take time to identify landmarks along its route and commit them to memory. I once nearly lost a deer at the edge of an open hayfield because I couldn’t identify exactly where the animal had been standing when it was hit or the path it took when it bolted after the shot. This should be your first priority. Don’t let the excitement of the moment overwhelm you. The terrain will look different when you are on the ground versus in your stand, so look for fixed points of reference.

### ► PAY ATTENTION TO ANGLE:

Broadside shots are best, of course, but oftentimes that’s not how the animal presents itself. Even a slight angle can send your bullet or arrow off course, so don’t take a shot if the animal is quartering toward you or away from you. This takes great patience, but it’s vital to making a clean shot.



## AFTER THE SHOT

► **DON'T RUSH:** This is one of the most common mistakes hunters make, even those with a great deal of experience. It can take anywhere from seconds to hours for an animal to expire, so don't be in a rush. Spooking wounded game will extend the search and may cost you in the long run.

► **USE A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH:**

Your first goal is to identify where the trail starts. Every few feet, mark the trail with tape and take time to examine the blood. If it's frothy and contains pink tissue and air bubbles, it's likely lung blood, which is great. Red muscular blood can indicate a heart shot or a marginal hit in the shoulder. Bits of fodder and green material mean you're likely looking at a gut shot. Track slowly, marking locations where you find blood. Don't proceed unless you have clear evidence that the animal went in that direction.

► **STAY OFF THE TRAIL:** Work from either side of the blood so that you don't obliterate the trail. You might need to come back and reexamine areas where you've already searched, and that minute drop of blood that would have shown you the animal's course could be lost if you walk through its path. Avoid massive search parties—one or two experienced trackers will often be more successful.

► **LOOK FOR HIDDEN CLUES:**

Many hunters focus solely on the ground, and this means missing blood on standing brush and tall grass. These traces will also help you identify how high the shot was relative to the animal's body. Aside from blood, look for broken branches and grass, tracks, and any other sign that could be easy to miss.

► **GET HIGH-TECH:** There are a number of new products that could help you find a lost animal.



The Bloodhunter's special lens filters amplify drops.

Blood trailing lights like the Primos Bloodhunter HD amplify blood and make it much easier to see in low-light conditions. Thermal imaging cameras like the FLIR Scout display "hot" points where blood has dropped in the grass, making it easier to identify the animal's path of travel. A few squirts of luminol mixed with water from a spray bottle can help reveal blood in the dark.

► **UNDERSTAND FORENSICS:**

Crime scene investigators learn to read blood patterns, and you should too. When blood drops fall, the shape of the mark they leave is relative to the direction of the animal's travel, and these subtle clues can point you in the right direction. Round blood drops have fallen straight down

from above—a sign the animal was standing still. As a wounded animal runs, blood drops will splatter and elongate with the speed and direction of travel. The "tail" of a blood drop indicates the direction the animal was traveling, so use these tails as arrows to point you toward your lost game.

► **CALL IN THE DOGS:** Where legal, blood-trailing dogs are a beneficial aid for finding lost game. But as time passes and as human trackers compromise the scent trail by walking back and forth over the track, the trail becomes harder and harder for a dog to follow. If the trail can't be easily identified, call in the dogs while there's still a chance of finding your game.

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# WATERFOWL INSIDER

## TIP

If you trailer hundreds of decoys, consider ditching the slotted deke bags in favor of a few **large, handled grain bags**. They make setup and pick up a lot easier.



MARK RAYCROFT

A solo hunter totes his hard-earned honker out of an eastern Ontario cattail slough.

## PERSONAL FOWL

HUNTING TIPS FOR  
THE LONE GOOSE HUNTER  
BY ERIC MATHES

T

THERE ARE FEW things more enjoyable than sharing a duck blind with your favorite hunting partners. Over the course of a long season, though, there are bound to be days when you just have to hunt but can't find anyone to join you. While a successful day of flying solo can be very rewarding, it's also considerably more work than sharing duties with a buddy or two. This is because you're accountable for all stages from start to finish. There's no one else to rely on if your headlamp batteries die at 4 a.m., and you'll be the only one answering the question, "Well, how do the decoys look?"





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**H**ere are some tips that should help keep your waders dry and duck strap full the next time you venture out alone.

## WORK SMARTER, NOT HARDER

► As a general rule of thumb, preparation dictates success. Out in the marsh, the solo hunter does everything alone, so being prepared and well organized is vital.

I often make checklists—especially for weekend trips—that include everything from extra headlamp batteries to granola bars. A list takes just minutes to create and gives me a visual cue to double-check what I might've forgotten. Spend extra time the night before going through your bag. It's worth it.

Avery pro-staffer Nathan Bender spends much of his time hunting alone in the sloughs of southern Wisconsin, and he understands the value of preparation. "Being well organized when hunting by yourself makes getting things set up and taken down a lot easier," he says.

Along with getting everything else you need to a particular hunting location, toting decoys is typically a solo waterfowler's biggest chore. Bender carries his in slotted bags to keep the decoys separate and prevent time-sucking frustrations like tangled lines. In recent years, many hunters have come to favor Texas-rigged decoy lines, which can be deployed and collected quickly. (There are many instructional videos on YouTube demonstrating how to Texas-rig your dekes.)

## ESSENTIAL GEAR

► Over time, the self-reliant hunter learns what equipment makes his life easier in the field, and something I've come to rely on for hunting swamps is the MoMarsh Fatboy DP layout boat (\$1,349; [momarsh.com](http://momarsh.com)). It's just big enough for me, my gear, and my dog, and I've equipped mine with a small mud motor that gets me almost anywhere I want to go.

The Fatboy can be covered with layout-style doors and



**A good dog provides both assistance and companionship to the solo hunter.**

tucked under willows and up against marsh grass, thanks to its low profile. The boat's small size allows everything to be accessible and easy to manage by one person—from loading and unloading at the ramp to collecting decoys while running the motor.

## CANINE COMPANIONSHIP

► A well-trained retriever is an important tool for any hunter, as a dog increases the odds that

every bird makes it back to the blind. But for the soloist, a dog provides great companionship, too. My young Lab, Crash, and I spend most of our summer nights in the yard or out on the training grounds preparing for the season ahead.

Dog training in the off-season is a great way for hunters to stay sharp while prepping for opening day, too. I often incorporate dog stands and blinds in our training sessions to simulate

hunting scenarios so that nothing is a surprise for Crash on the first morning out. At the same time, tinkering with gear my dog will use allows me time to understand the equipment and find the right products to use for the fall.

The solo hunter is a tough breed of waterfowler, and his key to success is knowing the processes and the gear that will work for him from opening day to the final flight.



## WAVE 'EM IN

THE DO'S AND DON'T OF VISUALLY ATTRACTING GEESE TO YOUR SPREAD **BY NATHAN MILLER**

**D**one correctly, flagging can be a very valuable tool in the goose hunter's repertoire. It's a great way to get birds' attention at a distance, and it can add realism to a spread. How you use a flag, however, can be the difference between a good day afield and a bad one.

## THE DO'S

► **BE AGGRESSIVE:** Whether hunting the X or running traffic, I always wave my flag vigorously when I first spot geese, usually when they're mere dots in the sky. (And, yes, I've waved at a few planes over the years.)

► **HIT THEM ON THE TURN:** Hitting birds with a call as they bank toward or away from you is almost always a good idea, and this holds true for flagging. Rarely will geese cup all the way into a spread from a mile out, so if they circle my spread more than once, I'll hit the flag just as they are veering toward or away from the blinds. I want to be seen in their peripheral vi-

sion—adding a touch of realism to the decoys when the birds aren't focused on the spread.

► **MIX IT UP:** I use Rig 'Em Right flags to get the birds' attention when they're way off. As they get near, I switch to Molt Gear's Magic Mike Flag System, which is like a jerk rig for field hunting—it's perfect for instilling that last bit of confidence as the birds draw in close, and working it requires minimal movement on your part.

## THE DON'T

► **BE DUMB:** Common sense is your friend. A goose's eyesight is keen, and a flock of many

geese means lots of wary eyes are trained on everything you do. Shaking your hand outside your blind as birds get within 100 yards is playing with fire.

## THE CONCLUSION

There are days when calling works better than flagging and vice versa. Other days, you must combine the two. Figuring out which type of day it is usually requires multiple flocks. I always pick up the call first and fill in with the flag as necessary. Using them both gives me a better understanding of what the birds want to see and hear, and prevents me from spending all day scratching my head.



A hunter attempts to flag down a passing flock of geese in a Manitoba grainfield.

BILL BUCKLEY

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# TEAL ON THE REBOUND

ONCE THE SHOOTING STARTS, TEAL RETREAT TO SECLUDED HIDEOUTS. BE SURE YOU'RE THERE WAITING FOR THEM **BY TOM CARPENTER**

**T**here is everything to love about teal. Mini nasally quacks and whooshing wings fill the starlit darkness as you toss decoys into the pungent marsh air. At pink dawn, a squadron of teal jets in, careening into your setup like a twisting, turning swarm of bees. Guns boom, a few birds fall, and laughter abounds. Later, there is no finer eating.

Whether you hunt them during a special early season or in the regular duck season, our littlest ducks are tops in hunters' bags across North America. They might be small in stature and abundant in number, but they are not dumb. They won't stick to traditional water once the shooting starts, which is why you need to set up for "rebound" teal that retreat to tiny water and secluded potholes.

## AWAY FROM THE CROWD

I was on the big water when I found my first rebound-teal spot. The morning flight had ended early, but for a couple of hours I could see teal flying back and forth at the other end of the marsh—a maze of small puddle openings that required a lot of walking to get to, and nobody ever bothered to hunt.

A quick scouting trip in the afternoon revealed a kidney-shaped opening, maybe the size of a couple of tennis courts, with a few dozen teal packed in and gabbling away. We got up an extra hour early the next morning, packed in, and shot a limit of singles and doubles on that still-reliable hidey-hole.

My favorite rebound-teal spot is a prairie pothole puddle maybe 20 yards long and 30 yards wide. It's on a public waterfowl production area, almost exactly 1 mile (as the teal flies) from a large wetland complex that sees heavy hunting pressure. The hunting here is like clockwork.

There are no teal when we arrive, so my son and I toss a few decoys into the shallow water. As shooting light approaches, we hide in the cattails. Out on the big water, the hunters see birds and count down the minutes. Then, the familiar *whump, whump, whump* of the first-light

barrage fills the air, followed by even more shooting. We wait.

After running the gauntlet of guns on the big water, the teal dive-bomb right into our oasis of small-water seclusion. The shooting is easy: The big flocks have broken up, and lots of singles and doubles come in on set wings. We force ourselves to take only shots that will drop birds onto the water, for easy retrieval.

## DO YOUR SCOUTING

One of the best and easiest tools for scouting out rebound-teal spots is Google Maps. It's simple to look at the bigger water that other hunters typically work and then locate small-water escapes well off the beaten path. Remember: Teal won't hesitate to travel a mile or more for safety.

Pack light and keep your plan simple. You don't need much besides a shotgun, shells, a small sack of decoys, and maybe a bucket to sit on. Teal decoys are ideal, but mallard blocks work just fine—teal trust cautious, wary mallards and will come right in.

Keep your decoy sets simple. Toss the blocks so they dot the water here and there, leaving landing zones for the real birds. A loose grouping of decoys with an opening directly in front of you is another smart setup.

It's exciting to be on the big water and get a couple of cracks at the ducks at first light. But it's better still to be on the small water, shooting a limit of teal on the rebound.



A brace of bluewings zip through a Saskatchewan marsh.





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# TOP DUCK CALLS

IF YOU'RE LOOKING TO ADD TO YOUR LANYARD, START YOUR SEARCH WITH THESE FIVE CALLS **BY NATHAN MILLER**

**T**rying to select a new duck call can be an overwhelming experience, causing you to slowly go cross-eyed as you thumb through page after page of a sporting-goods catalog and read umpteen product descriptions that all sound the same. Luckily, you don't have to weed through the merits of dozens of calls. I've narrowed it down to five that have served me well over the years. Each has something different to offer and deserves a look.



## DUCK COMMANDER DUCK PICKER

► **THIS EASY-BLOWING** double-reed has hung around my neck for many years. It's a great call for novices and has a very small learning curve. Some calls require many hours to master, but not the Duck Picker. It has a true ducky sound and is incredibly versatile. (\$35; [duckcommander.com](http://duckcommander.com))



## HAYDEL'S DIRTY RICE

► **THIS DOUBLE-REED CALL** is extremely easy to blow and has a nice smooth sound. What I like the most about the Dirty Rice, though, is the squeal it can produce at the end of a note that mimics a hen mallard with food caught in her throat. This is my go-to call when I'm lying in a cornfield trying to persuade a flock to make one last pass. (\$25; [haydels.com](http://haydels.com))



## GK CALLS CALL GIRL

► **I PICKED UP THIS CALL** last year at a waterfowl festival in my home state of Michigan. I chose a cocobolo version (which can be custom-ordered), but it's primarily available in acrylic. Again, this call is very easy to blow, yet it has a true sound and really nails the raspy hen that many of us look for in a call. (\$115; [gkcalls.com](http://gkcalls.com))



## ZINK PH-2 (POLYCARBONATE)

► **THE PH-2 IS** a very versatile double-reed duck call. Its wide-open barrel allows it to be blown loudly for big-water or windy-day birds, yet it can be blown very softly and toned down for finishing notes when the birds get within range. (\$25; [zinkcalls.com](http://zinkcalls.com))



## ECHO DIAMONDWOOD TIMBER DUCK CALL

► **THIS EXCELLENT DOUBLE-REED** call has all the volume and raspiness of a single. What I love most about it is the control I have on the chuckle, and the ease with which I can get back up on the comeback and high-ball notes without going over the edge. (\$55; [echocalls.com](http://echocalls.com))



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# SUMMER GOOSE SECRETS

SPECIAL EARLY CANADA GOOSE SEASONS ABOUND, AND ANYBODY CAN GET IN ON THE ACTION. HERE'S HOW  
**BY TOM CARPENTER**



By now you've heard about the grand comeback of the Canada goose. In fact, the big birds are doing so well these days that it's hard to find a state that doesn't have a special early goose season for targeting resident Canadas.

If you don't yet take advantage of warm-weather goose hunts, this is the year to take the plunge. Happily, the gear needs are small, and the secrets to success are simple.

## THE SCOUTING

A vehicle, a binocular, and some free time are all you need to scout a great spot to hunt early-season geese. Before the season, locate their roost water, station yourself between the birds and likely feeding fields, and follow the birds as they fly out for their evening feed.

If you lose the birds, drive around until you find them, keeping in mind that geese are both grain and salad eaters now. Harvested wheat, barley, oat, and pea fields are prime spots, especially after there's been some rain and greenery has sprouted amid the stubble.

Another good place to locate

and then hunt birds is on their daytime loafing water. Summer geese often won't go all the way back to their nighttime roost after their morning feed. Instead they stop off at ponds, potholes, stock tanks, and other small, out-of-the-way water in open country to wait for the afternoon feeding session.

## THE SETUP

A dozen to 15 decoys work just fine for field hunting. Geese are in their family groups now, so small numbers of birds are the norm. Two or three dozen full bodies just won't look natural.

A simple field setup is best: a small horseshoe of decoys with a little cluster at the bottom of



A hunter hauls a strap full of early-season Canadas through a North Carolina cut cornfield.



**OL**

## WATERFOWL INSIDER

### EARLY GEESE



South Dakota hunters wait for the afternoon flight at a prairie pothole set.

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the U. Put your layout blinds in front of that cluster, with the wind at your back.

For hunting over water, loafing sets are my favorite. Again, go with a dozen to 15 decoys. Split them between floaters on the water and full-bodies on land. For realism, give a couple of the full-bodies "wet feet," so they look like they are going in or coming out of the water.

It's usually not a problem to get land-owner permission to hunt field Canadas. I always travel in goose country armed with gift cards for local eateries that I hand out as thank-yous for a yes.

IF YOU LOSE THE BIRDS, DRIVE AROUND UNTIL YOU FIND THEM, KEEPING IN MIND THAT **GEESE ARE BOTH GRAIN AND SALAD EATERS NOW.** HARVESTED WHEAT, BARLEY, OAT, AND PEA FIELDS ARE PRIME SPOTS.

### THE SPECIFICS

Hunting summer geese might be simple, but that doesn't mean you can ignore the details. Remember: You're hunting flocks led by ultra-wary parent geese protecting their brood.

Always put out a couple of alert sentry decoys, to mimic what the parent geese would be doing. The majority of the remaining decoys should be feeders, with a few resters. At loafing-water sets, put the sentries on land; floaters can be mostly resters.

Summer geese have already seen the places you're hunting, so brush in layout blinds well with grain straw, weed leaves, or grass. Muddy up your blinds to get rid of any sheen. Wear a face mask and gloves to cover any exposed skin.

Call sparingly, but don't be shy if flying birds aren't looking. Get on them hard and try to get a head to turn. Once birds are coming, talk only in soft, summery clucks and moans.

Improvise whenever possible. One of the best loafing-water hunts I ever had was on a cattle-watering pond—a glorified puddle, really—in the middle of a huge central-Minnesota cow pasture. We put out decoys and nestled into deeply rutted cow trails that led to the water. The pile of geese we accumulated made us forget about the way we smelled at the end of the day.



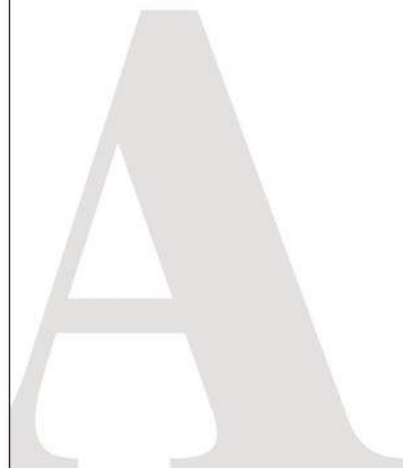
# BOWHUNTING INSIDER

## TIP

Fire up pre-rut **mock scrape** hotspots by mixing equal parts of ammonia, kosher salt, and mineral oil and pouring it under **overhanging branches** on a field edge.

## BLACK BEAR SUPER SIGN

OVERLOOKED TIP-OFFS  
TO HELP YOU SCORE  
THIS FALL  
**BY BILL VAZNIS**



As ubiquitous as it is in many regions of the country, black bear sign can be hugely confounding and hard to interpret. Here are three bits of black bear evidence that many hunters overlook, but that are bona fide indicators of the presence of big bruins.



Adult coyote tracks (right) will measure 2.5 inches wide. A mature bear's print will be at least 5 inches.

TOM & PAT LEESEON





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1

varying degrees of dryness, indicating he is using this staging area on a regular day-to-day basis.

Set up in the afternoon, taking thermals into consideration.

## 2 TRACK A BOAR

There are only a handful of sows entered into the Pope and Young record book. If you've set your sights on a book bear, you'll more than likely need to concentrate on taking a boar. The most obvious sign that you have a record-book bruin in your midst is the width of the front paw print. The track of a mature black bear will measure 5 inches across the top of the pad. If its pad measures 7 inches or greater, chances are you're on a bear with a skull that will measure 20 inches or more. The P&Y minimum is 18 inches.

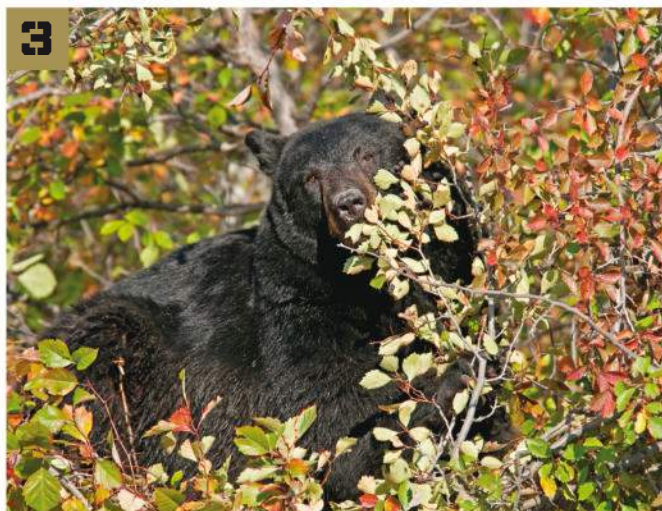
Because boars typically have longer bodies than sows, take note of the spacing between tracks as well. The stride of an average bear is 18 to 19 inches. The gait of a walking mature boar, from the tip of his front paw to the heel of his rear pad, is considerably greater in distance than that of a mature sow. Overall, mature sows will measure approximately 60 inches or less from nose to tail. Shoot a boar that measures 80 inches or more and you're looking at a candidate for Pope and Young.

Know, too, that a mature boar often walks pigeon-toed. That is, his front pads point inward toward the center of his body. Look for this sign where the bears have walked at least 25 yards or so in sand or soft earth.

Big boars have big bodies with barrel chests. If you draw a line down the center of their trail, you will see that the tracks of sows are much closer to that imaginary center line than those of a big boar.



2



3

## 1 LOCATE STAGING AREAS

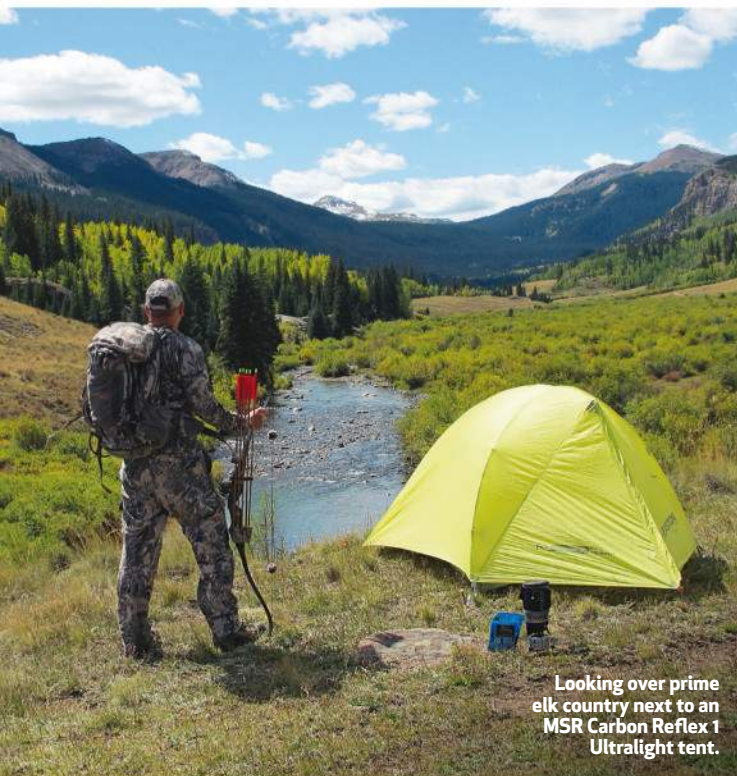
Whitetail hunters might be familiar with deer staging areas, but black bears have such hangout zones as well. Bears will often keep tabs on a feeding area from a safe distance—along a hilltop or a brush-covered ledge—for an hour or so before committing themselves to feeding in the open. Here, they will sit on their haunches testing the wind and listening for danger. They might even lie down on their belly like a dog, waiting for darkness to fall.

Look for matted-down grass, leaves, and piles of bear scat in

## 3 FIND A NEST

Understanding the seasonal food preferences of black bears is critical to hunting success, especially in states where baiting and hunting with hounds are illegal. Although bears are unrestrained feeders, they do leave behind some subtle tip-offs that you can use to both find fresh food sources and perhaps even judge a particular animal's size. Just look up. In autumn, black bears will climb to the uppermost reaches of oak, beech, cherry, and big apple trees to scarf down ripened fruit. Typically, they will sit on a branch near the trunk of the tree and gather in nearby branches with their front paws, stripping off the fruit with their teeth. In so doing, they invariably break the small branches as they circle the trunk, leaving what appears to be a huge bird's nest near the top of the tree. Also look for fresh claw marks on the tree trunk and fresh scat underneath the canopy to confirm your suspicions. Big bears leave sizable droppings.





Looking over prime elk country next to an MSR Carbon Reflex 1 Ultralight tent.

# ULTRALIGHT WAPITI

WHEN YOUR ENTIRE ELK SEASON IS AT STAKE, GO SMALL OR GO HOME **BY MARK MELOTIK**

**S**lowly and steadily whipping yourself into peak physical condition over a several-month period is just one of the smart ways to tip the odds in your favor on your next DIY backpack elk bow-hunt. Another? Carrying truly ultralight hunting gear. The reason is simple physics. When the terrain gets vertical and the air gets thin, the lighter your pack and arsenal are, the faster and farther you can range per day. All else being equal, that increased quickness and mobility translates into more wapiti encounters—and, ultimately, more success.

How light can you go and still pack all the necessary gear? That's a question all serious elk hunters must consider. There are few downsides to quality featherweight gear, but one is cost: You'll pay—in some cases, dearly—for the lightest premium designs. The best advice might be to shop around for off-season sales—the benefits of planning well ahead. What follows is a dream-team lineup of what's available. None will necessarily break the bank, but they will help you hunt tough country in relative comfort.



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**EASTON ULTRALIGHT CARBON 3 TREKKING POLES** (12.8 oz.; \$140; [eastonoutfitters.com](http://eastonoutfitters.com))

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At its introduction a few years ago, the X-Frame was the lightest full-length pad (72x18x1.5 inches) on the market. Better yet, it packs down to the size of a soda can. Crazy good.

**KUIIU ULTRA NX RAIN JACKET** (8.9 oz.; \$300) **AND PANT** (7.5 oz.; \$250; [kuiiu.com](http://kuiiu.com))

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**SITKA KELVIN DOWN ULTRALIGHT JACKET** (10.6 oz.; \$289; [sitkagear.com](http://sitkagear.com))

This is better than a down jacket as you emerge from your tent in the morning. And when a front moves in, you'll appreciate Sitka's ultra-high-quality standards.



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Early-season Colorado bowhunters prepare to double-team a bedded mule deer buck.

# BREAK THE MOLD FOR MULEYS

THROW TRADITIONAL BOWHUNTING TACTICS OUT THE WINDOW FOR YOUR BEST CRACK AT TODAY'S MULE DEER **BY MARK KAYSER**

**W**hitetail bowhunters sit in trees and mule deer hunters spot and stalk. If you follow that mindset on your next Western mule deer bowhunt, you might be limiting yourself and your success. Use every strategy—muley-like or not—from your whitetail playbook to optimize your opportunities for success this fall.

## PARTNER UP

■ Nothing suggests Western hunting more than spot-and-stalk mule deer hunting, but you can increase your stalking success by hunting with someone.

First, two sets of eyes are better than one. During your initial spotting session, a part-

ner's eyes can help you cover more country with scrutiny. Face it: Some hunters have better spotting abilities than others.

Next, a partner can keep an eye on a buck as you make your move. Whether it's bedded or traveling, it's commonplace for a buck to disappear once you start decreasing real estate between you and it. The buck could exit a side canyon you never saw. It could bed and then move because it was uncomfortable, or because it miscalculated the shade available. A coyote might even bump it. Your partner could spot the sly move and alert you to it via hand signals or electronic communication where legal.

Lastly, if you do pull off a successful stalk

JOHN HAFNER



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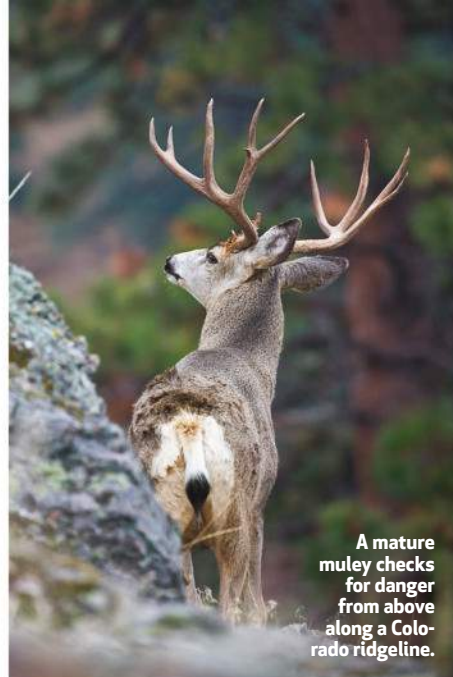




and creep into range of a buck, there's no guarantee of a shot. Instead of trying to get a buck to stand by tossing rocks or whistling, put your partner into play several hundred yards away. Have him take a position between you and the buck, and stand in full view, wave his arms slowly, or walk. Oftentimes a buck will watch intently or even stand. Regardless, the distraction gives you a narrow window in which to make a move.

### TAKE A STAND

■ There's nothing wrong with a whitetail ambush for muleys. Mule deer follow patterns and repeatedly visit the same locations, but they often take a slightly different entrance on each visit. Be ready for several days of sitting for the pattern to repeat. Early season is best for patterns to emerge, especially with bachelor groups of feeding bucks. Watch a hayfield. Note the arrival and departure



A mature muley checks for danger from above along a Colorado ridgeline.

routes muleys use. Now set up your tree-stand or ground blind.

As you scout, keep in mind the best location may be hidden several hundred yards from the field. Be sure to backtrack on game trails leading to bedding cover and look for terrain features that funnel deer, such as ledges, canyons, and saddles. These could force deer into a tighter trap than the average field-edge trail.

And don't forget about water, particularly if you bowhunt arid or desert regions. Ground blinds or treestands overlooking water can pay off in early-season heat and during the rut, when bucks become thirsty athletes. Put your trail cameras to good use to document visits and to establish visiting hours.

### CALL...AND DECOY

■ Despite deer call manufacturers' marketing primarily to the whitetail crowd, you can use the same calls to lure in a mule deer. Mule deer vocalizations are nearly identical to those of their whitetail cousins. If anything, you can use inflection to introduce a deeper tone, but every whitetail call you own reliably mimics mule deer.

In September, you can entice curious mule deer into range using soft grunts, bleats, and sparring noises made by the gentle clicking of rattling antlers. As rutting behavior begins to surface later in the fall, due to testosterone surges, rattling becomes even more beneficial for drawing a buck in close. Once the buck falls for the ruse, you can pull him the last few yards with grunts, bleats, and even snort-wheezes. Combine your calls with decoys, like those manufactured by Montana Decoy or Be the Decoy, and you can create a complete illusion.

There's no reason to stick to one tactic when you hit the fields for a mule deer archery hunt. Revitalize traditional tactics and try something new—even if it has a whitetail air about it.



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# SHOOTING

FIELD TEST

## BEAST MODE

+ Thompson/Center has given the potent 500 Smith & Wesson a performance upgrade by introducing it in the Pro Hunter rifle. We set out to test the gains (and pains) involved in shooting this cartridge out of a longer barrel, which generates greater velocity. And kick. **BY JAMES HALL**



### TIP

When shooting a break-action rifle for accuracy off a rest, apply minimal cheek pressure to the stock to keep the action from flexing.

The addition of a JP muzzle brake helped tame the formidable kick of the S&W .500 in the T/C Pro Hunter.



T

The scope hit Marc Amos with such force that his ears rippled from the impact. This was our first test shot from a Thompson/Center Pro Hunter fitted with a Smith & Wesson .500 Magnum Katahdin barrel. Before judging the recoil too harshly, though, know that Amos—a 47-year-old gun nut from Columbus, Miss.—did fail to grab the forearm of the rifle prior to squeezing the trigger. Still, watching the video of the shot in slow motion was like viewing frame-by-frame footage of Mike Tyson landing a right hook to the belly of Jabba the Hut. Awesome.

Our goal was to gather data on the S&W .500's performance in a rifle platform. There's plenty of information available about how this Godzilla of a cartridge behaves in hand cannons. But velocity, energy, and bullet-drop data on the round in a rifle has been nonexistent. Until now.



We shot our test rifle at distances out to 250 yards and measured accuracy, energy, and bullet drop.

**BALLISTICS DATA FOR THE FEDERAL PREMIUM VITAL-SHOK 325-GRAIN SWIFT A-FRAME FROM A 20-INCH BARREL**

Range (yd.)	Velocity (fps)	Energy (ft.-lb.)	Trajectory (in.)
<b>MUZZLE</b>	<b>2,189</b>	<b>3,458</b>	<b>-1.5</b>
<b>50</b>	<b>2,109</b>	<b>3,210</b>	<b>0.2</b>
<b>100</b>	<b>2,031</b>	<b>2,977</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>150</b>	<b>1,955</b>	<b>2,758</b>	<b>-2.3</b>
<b>200</b>	<b>1,880</b>	<b>2,552</b>	<b>-6.9</b>
<b>250</b>	<b>1,808</b>	<b>2,359</b>	<b>-14</b>

### ► The Data

Bullet options for the S&W .500 Magnum range from 275 to 500 grains. We opted for the Federal Premium Vital-Shok 325-grain Swift A-Frame. This bullet is a great all-around

choice for hunting big game, and it shoots flat enough so that long shots are possible.

The baseline ballistics from a handgun platform is 1,800 fps muzzle velocity with 2,338 ft.-lb. of muzzle energy. However, when the round is shot

from a 20-inch rifle barrel, the transformation is impressive. The chronograph clocked our 10 shots at an average of 2,189 fps, a nearly 300 fps gain when compared to a handgun. The increase in speed translates to a muzzle energy of 3,458 ft.-lb. That's enough power to knock over a building, as well as any animal walking the earth.

To add a twist to the test, we had an aftermarket muzzle brake installed to measure recoil reduction. We shot one group of five with a muzzle brake and one group without. The muzzle brake had no discernable effect on bullet velocity.

The most surprising result from our test was bullet drop. We assumed a 325-grain bul-



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## SHOOTING FIELD TEST



T/C's Pro Hunter rifle features a 20-inch barrel and rubberized inserts in the stock and forend.

### ► STATS

**Caliber:** .500 S&W Magnum

**Capacity:** 1

**Weight:** 7 lb.

**Trigger pull:** 5 lb. 1 oz.

**Barrel length:** 20 in.

**Overall length:** 34.5 in.

**Price:** \$852

**Contact:** tcarms.com

It would fly like an anchor being thrown from a boat. But with a 100-yard zero, we hit ¼ inch high at 50 yards and 2¼ inches low at 150. The bullet still carried 2,758 ft.-lb. of energy at that distance. A 200-yard shot isn't exactly a lob, either, with the bullet

dropping only 7 inches and retaining 2,552 ft.-lb. of energy.

Accuracy was better than expected as well. We had .75-inch 3-shot groups at 50 yards, with our best group at 100 yards measuring 1.3 inches. Things got a little wilder at 150 yards,

where our best group was 1.75 inches. Considering this is a 2.25-inch straight-walled handgun round, the results exceeded expectations.

### ► The Recoil

After Amos recovered from his

first shot, we attached the JP Enterprises muzzle brake and filmed a second shot in slow motion. To keep things consistent, he shot again without gripping the forearm of the rifle.

This shot resulted in more of a short jab than a heavyweight roundhouse—his ears didn't quiver. While reviewing the footage, we saw that the muzzle lift was reduced by several inches, which allowed for faster target reacquisition.

Amos took another five shots

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10x42	10x	113m/1000m 339ft/1000yds	fully multi-coated	Bak4/Roof	17.64	42mm	Yes

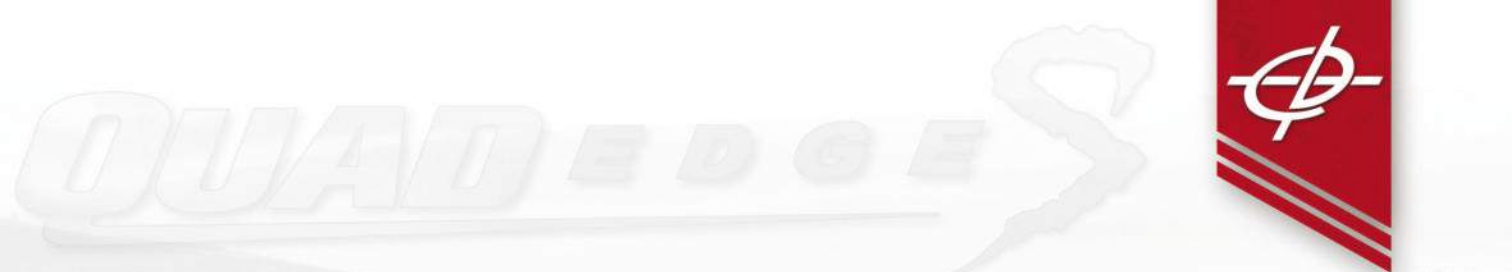


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with and without the brake to judge recoil. Once the testing was done, we came to the conclusion that the Katahdin setup was similar to the recoil of a .300 Winchester Magnum without the brake, and had the punch of a .30/06 once the brake was applied.

In both cases, the recoil was much less than anticipated. The Pro Hunter uses a Sims recoil pad and features a Flex-Tech stock, both of which seem to effectively dilute the kick.

### ► End Game

When slinging this Pro Hunter over your shoulder, you aren't heading to the woods with a hammer in your hands—it's more like an anvil. With the muzzle brake in place, the shooting experience is pleasant, albeit loud. It is a stocky, rugged big bore that will not only excel as a brush gun, but it also has the ability to reach out a couple of football fields if need be. And there is not a game animal alive that this caliber will not drop in its tracks.

### NOTABLE FEATURES



+ This massive muzzle brake from JP Enterprises is called the Recoil Eliminator, and it is available for a number of different calibers and thread styles. The substantial surface area on the interior baffles redirects the muzzle blast, reducing the felt recoil.



+ The hammer spur on the Thompson/Center Pro Hunter is hinged so that it can be rotated to one side or the other. This amount of offset allows the hammer to be cocked more easily (and ergonomically) when a scope is mounted on the receiver.



+ One thing fans of the Smith & Wesson .500 appreciate is its versatility. With bullet weights ranging from 275 to 500 grains in commercial ammo, it can handle a wide swath of hunting and shooting chores—everything from small predators to dangerous game.

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# RIBS THREE WAYS

RAISED, STEPPED, OR FLAT: WHICH STYLE IS BEST FOR YOU? **BY BRAD FITZPATRICK**

**A** few decades ago, shotgun designers figured out that a hot barrel creates waves of distortion, and that those waves make it hard to shoot well. The answer to the problem was simple: a raised rib, sometimes ventilated, on the

top of the shotgun to keep heat waves from messing up the sight picture. Raised ribs have become commonplace, but they differ in design and purpose. Here's a look at the three most common rib types and what they can do for you.

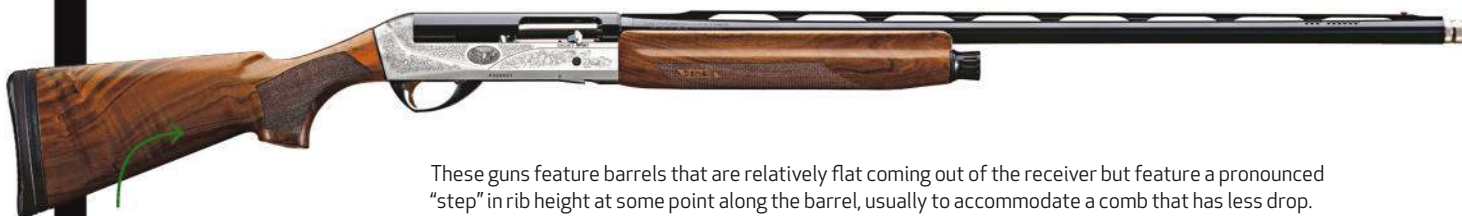
## RAISED RIB ▼



Caesar Guerini Challenger Trap

These ventilated ribs are very tall and designed primarily for use on trap guns, though they are gaining in popularity for skeet and sporting clays. The raised-rib design allows the shooter to sustain a more comfortable head-up profile when shooting. And since the barrel is well below the rib, acquiring targets is easier and faster. A high rib is a magnet for briars, leaves, and tree branches, however, so this is not a gun that's made for hunting.

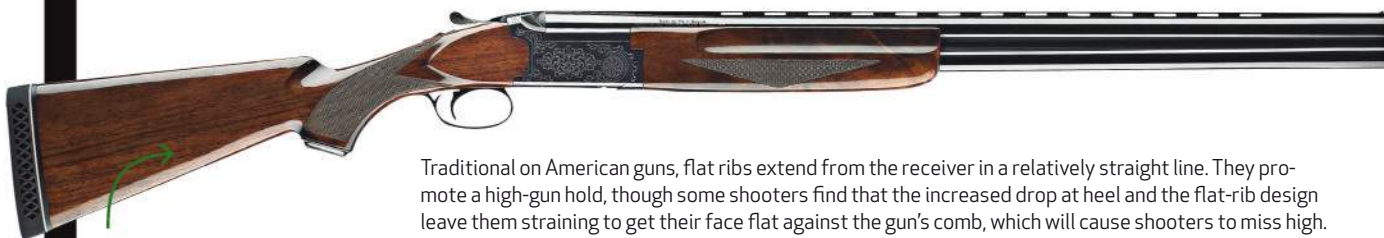
## STEPPED RIB ▼



Benelli Legacy Sport

These guns feature barrels that are relatively flat coming out of the receiver but feature a pronounced "step" in rib height at some point along the barrel, usually to accommodate a comb that has less drop. The stepped rib makes sight alignment fast and easy, as the shooter's head stays in a relatively upright position. Thin, long-necked shooters tend to shoot better with high-ribbed guns.

## FLAT RIB ▼



Winchester Model 101 Field

Traditional on American guns, flat ribs extend from the receiver in a relatively straight line. They promote a high-gun hold, though some shooters find that the increased drop at heel and the flat-rib design leave them straining to get their face flat against the gun's comb, which will cause shooters to miss high. Conventional thinking has it that stockier shooters with short necks tend to perform better with flat-rib shotguns, though practicing a smooth mount and tight cheek weld will prevent sloppy technique.



**Rib Width** Field ribs tend to be narrower (6mm to 9mm wide), while sporting clays ribs are wider (10mm-plus). This is largely because companies began putting fat ribs on "sporting clays" models and the idea stuck. Many ribs are tapered, meaning they are wider at the rear of the barrel than at the muzzle, the idea being that the narrowing rib helps focus the shooter's attention on the target. The rib serves primarily as a reference point regarding the cant (angle) of the gun.





## THE BEST BEAD

► **MOST FIELD GUNS** have a single brass bead near the muzzle. White beads are also popular and are easier to pick up than brass. But you don't want to take your focus off the target, so if the bead distracts you, blot it out with a black marker or remove it altogether.

The same can be said for fiber-optic beads, which purport to be brighter and easier to see. If the white or fiber-optic bead doesn't distract you, it's fine to leave it on the gun, but it's not going to help you kill more doves or break more clays than any other front bead.

If your upland gun doubles as a turkey gun, you have an argument for a fiber-optic bead, as it makes aiming in low light (which you'll likely do hunting turkeys) easier.

Some guns have a mid bead, the idea being that if the front and mid beads are in line, the gun will shoot flat. But if the beads appear in a figure-8 pattern (with one bead stacked over the other), the gun is in position to shoot high, which is ideal for trap. A handful of clay shooters I've known shoot very successfully without any bead at all. —B.F.

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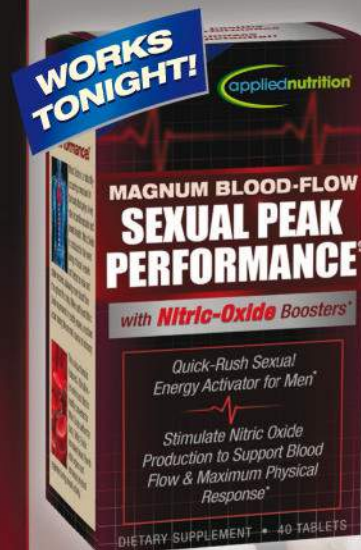
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# BROWNING BLR TAKEDOWN

A CLASSIC LEVER GUN GETS A TACTICAL MAKEOVER **BY JOHN B. SNOW**

I've always liked guns with personality, and this new iteration of the Browning BLR 81 Takedown certainly qualifies. Browning refers to this as the Black Label model, and even a cursory glance will tell you this is a different animal from the first BLRs that rolled off the production line back in 1969.

There's a whole lot of Picatinny happening here, with a two-part rail that runs along the top of the rifle and two rails positioned at the 3 and 9 o'clock positions at the front of the forend. Flip the rifle belly-up and you'll see a couple of flush-mount cups for sling attachments. And, of course, there's the sleek flash hider sitting at the end of the 16-inch barrel. What's going on here?

A cynical observer might say that Browning is trying to cash in on the tactical fad by slapping some black-rifle accoutrements on a stodgy old lever gun. However, I don't share that assessment. In fact, I think these enhancements, though they could benefit from some refinements, fit this rifle rather well.

## Performance

► The BLR I evaluated impressed me on many levels. First off, its craftsmanship is top notch. The satin-black finish on the metal is smooth, even, and lustrous, and contrasts nicely with the gray laminate stock. The fit and finish throughout the rifle is quite good. The butt pad, for instance, has been affixed to the stock expertly. Mechanically, the rifle operates as nice as it looks. Removing, load-

ing, and inserting the box magazine are intuitive operations. The action cycles in a smooth and positive manner, making for fast shooting. The rifle fed, extracted, and ejected all of the 200 rounds or so I put through it without any issues—though on long shot strings the rifle heats up considerably and you need to keep your fingers out of contact with the barrel and barrel band. My BLR was chambered in .223, but it is also being offered in .308 Win.

Perhaps the most pleasant surprise the rifle had in store was its accuracy. It shot really well, especially for a rifle that is both a takedown and a lever action—two characteristics that aren't usually associated with tight groups.

The rifle showed a distinct tendency to group with four tight shots and one flier. Part of this might be attributed to the trigger, which broke at an average of 7 pounds 4 ounces on my sample and required a lot of effort to trip cleanly. Mechanically, this was the one sour note the BLR struck during the test.

Even so, group sizes averaged 1.696 inches with bullets weighing between 50 and 60 grains. I also shot some 77-grain loads from Nosler, but the barrel's 1-in-12-inch twist rate wasn't fast enough to stabilize those projectiles, which keyholed through the target.

The best groups came from Winchester's 55-grain Varmint X load, which averaged 1.117 inches.

Given this type of performance, there isn't much this rifle can't do within the scope of a .223's capabilities.

PERFORMANCE					DESIGN				VALUE	TOTAL 84
Handling	Reliability	Accuracy	Meets Purpose	Versatility	Craftsmanship	Ergonomics	Durability	Aesthetics		
8	9	8	9	9	9	7	9	8	8	





The rails on the forend can be used to mount lasers or lights for personal defense use or low-light predator hunting.

## Sight Options

► I topped the rifle with one of the new Weaver 1-7x24 Tactical scopes that has a mil-dot reticle in the first focal plane and an illuminated central dot in the second focal plane. This optic is a good match for this rifle, as it can be dialed down in magnification for fast shooting up close, while at 7X (and with the benefit of the reticle's holdover marks) it had no problem ringing steel plates at 300 and 400 yards.

But the benefit of that full-length Picatinny rail is that the shooter can configure the rifle many ways. A scout-style scope with a long eye relief, a red-dot sight, a traditional variable-power scope, a ghost-ring setup—this BLR can accommodate them all.

## Refinements

► As far as the rifle's limitations go, the list isn't long, but here's what I'd love to see changed. First, it needs a better trigger. The rifle's accuracy would doubtless improve, both when shooting for precision on paper (or at game) and during speed drills on steel at short yardages. A faster twist rate on the barrel

## ► STATS

**Caliber:** .223 Remington

**Capacity:** 5+1

**Weight:** 7 lb. 8 oz.

**Trigger pull:** 7 lb. 4 oz.

**Barrel length:** 16 in.

**Accuracy:** 1.696 in.

**Smallest group:** 1.117 in.

**Overall length:** 34.75 in.

**Price:** \$1,599

**Contact:** [browning.com](http://browning.com)

would be helpful as well, in order to take advantage of some of the great heavy-for-caliber .223 loads on the market.

A higher comb height, or an adjustable cheekpiece, would be a smart addition, too. The stock's geometry was configured for iron sights placed right on top of the receiver. With the additional height created by the rail, rings, and a scope, the shooter's cheek tends to float high above the stock while establishing a good sight picture. That said, because of the mild recoil of the .223, I never had much issue maintaining the sight picture from shot to shot.

## FEATURES OF NOTE



✚ The manual safety is one of the more clever features on the Model 81. With the hammer at half-cock, pushing up on the underside of the hammer causes it to pivot forward in such a way that it no longer makes contact with the tail of the firing pin.



✚ The takedown mechanism is simple. Open the action enough to disengage the floating bolt head from the barrel, pull down on the takedown lever in the forend, and pull the rifle apart. Once this is done, the rifle transports easily, either in a vehicle or a bag.



# BEST NEW HUNTING LOADS

A HOT HALF DOZEN NEW AMMO INTRODUCTIONS FOR 2015

BY BRYCE M. TOWSLEY

## 1 BLACK HILLS 5.56 70-GRAIN GMX

► This year, Black Hills is adding a new heavy-bullet load to its 5.56 NATO lineup. The 70-grain Hornady GMX is a monolithic expanding bullet that's earned a good reputation among hunters for reliable expansion and nearly 100 percent weight retention. With this heavy-for-caliber bullet, the 5.56 will penetrate deep and create a large wound cavity on deer and hogs. Black Hills says that penetration in ballistic gelatin consistently runs 17 to 22 inches, with a wound diameter in the 5-inch range. Recovered bullet diameter averages nearly half an inch. The bullet needs a rifling twist of 1-in-8 inches or faster to stabilize. (\$80/50 rounds)

## 2 BARNES PRECISION MATCH

► Barnes has been loading precision ammo for military snipers for several years. That ammo is now being offered to civilian shooters.

The new Barnes Precision Match Ammunition is engineered for extreme accuracy and long-range performance. Barnes uses only the sleekest bullets with high ballistic coefficients and maintains unusually high levels of quality while assembling the ammo.

The 69-grain 5.56 load shot ½ MOA groups from my AR-15 rifle. Friends who shoot competitively and who have tested the Barnes Precision Match ammo at extreme ranges have nothing but good things to say about their experiences in the field with it.

It is offered in 20-round boxes of 69- and 85-grain loads in 5.56; a 175-grain load in .308; a 220-grain load in .300 Win. Mag.; and a 300-grain load in .338 Lapua. Prices start at \$27.56 in 5.56 and go up to \$105 per box in .338 Lapua.

## 3 AMERICAN EAGLE .338 LAPUA

► Long-range shooters love the .338 Lapua cartridge. What we don't love is the \$5-plus it costs every time we pull the trigger.



The new American Eagle .338 Lapua ammo has a street price of about 60 bucks for a box of 20 rounds. It's loaded with 285-grain Speer Hot Core bullets, which are not only accurate, but will also be perfect for hunters using the .338 Lapua. (\$67/20 rounds)

## 4 FEDERAL PREMIUM VITAL-SHOK TROPHY BONDED 10MM AUTO

► Handgun hunting for big game has been the domain of revolvers and single shots for years, but now you can add semi-autos to the mix. While 10mm cartridge was developed for use in a semi-auto handgun for self-defense, Federal is now loading it with a hunting bullet.

The Federal 180-grain Trophy Bonded bullet in 10mm has a muzzle velocity of 1,275 fps in 10mm. It generates 650 foot-pounds of muzzle energy, which puts it between the .357 Magnum and the .41 Magnum in performance, making this new 10mm load suitable for hunting deer, hogs, mountain lions, and similar size game. (\$39.95/20 rounds)

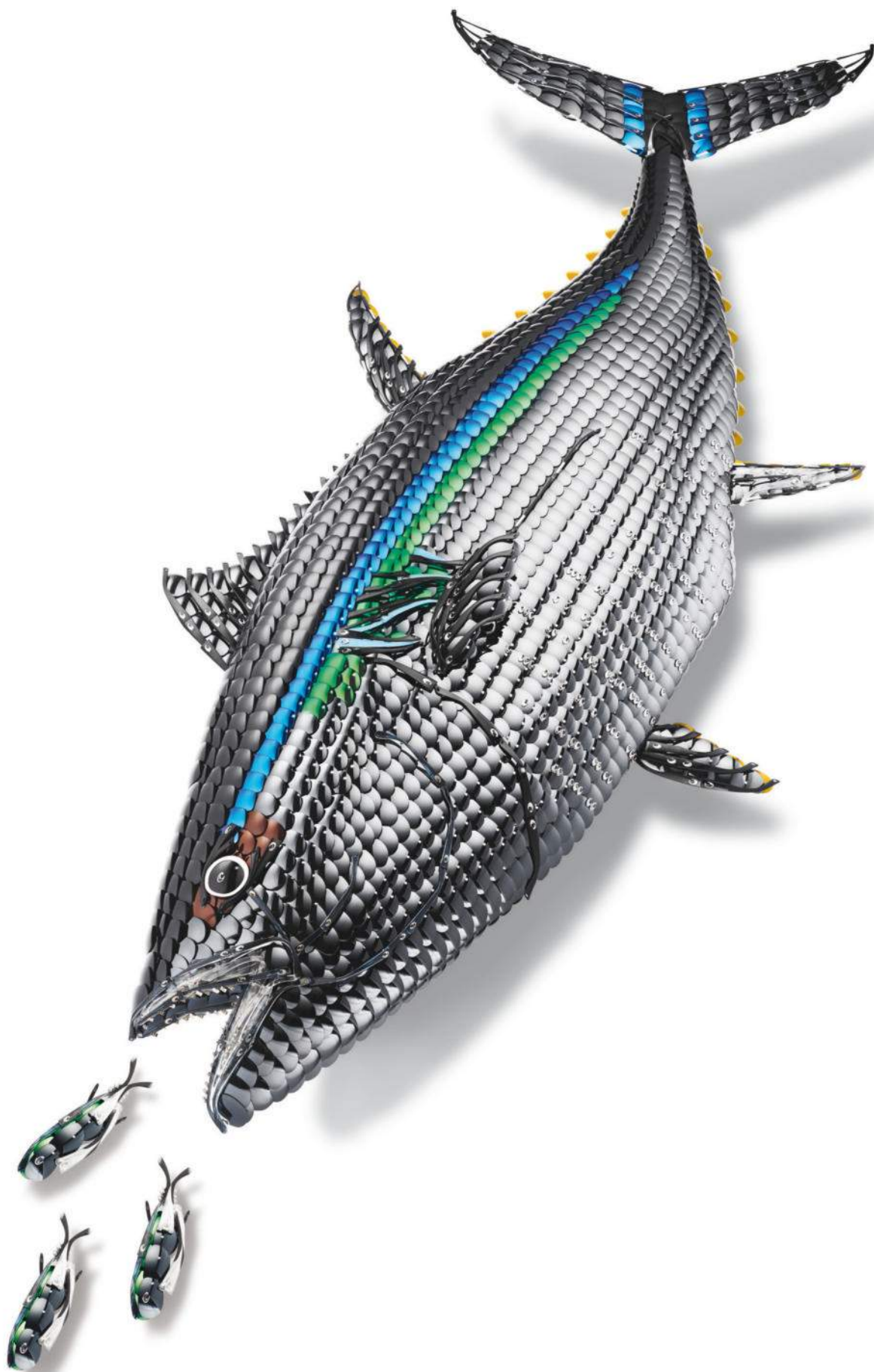
## 5 CCI A17 .17 HMR

► The CCI A17 .17 HMR ammo is optimized to run in the new Savage A17, but it will work just as well in any .17 HMR rifle. This ammo is 100 fps faster than any other current 17-grain .17 HMR load, and it's amazingly accurate. From my Savage A17 rifle, this ammo averaged .28-inch for three 3-shot groups at 50 yards. (\$67/200 rounds)

## 6 WINCHESTER DEER SEASON XP

► This new ammo from Big Red is all about the bullet, the first Winchester has designed specifically for deer. The key is the Extreme Point polymer tip, which is larger and seated deeper into the bullet than a traditional polymer tip, so that the hollow cavity underneath is much bigger than in other bullets. That's matched with a tapered bullet jacket to control expansion and a soft, swaged lead core for rapid expansion. Deer Season is available in all the popular deer cartridges, and is priced only slightly higher than bargain ammo. (\$22/20 rounds)





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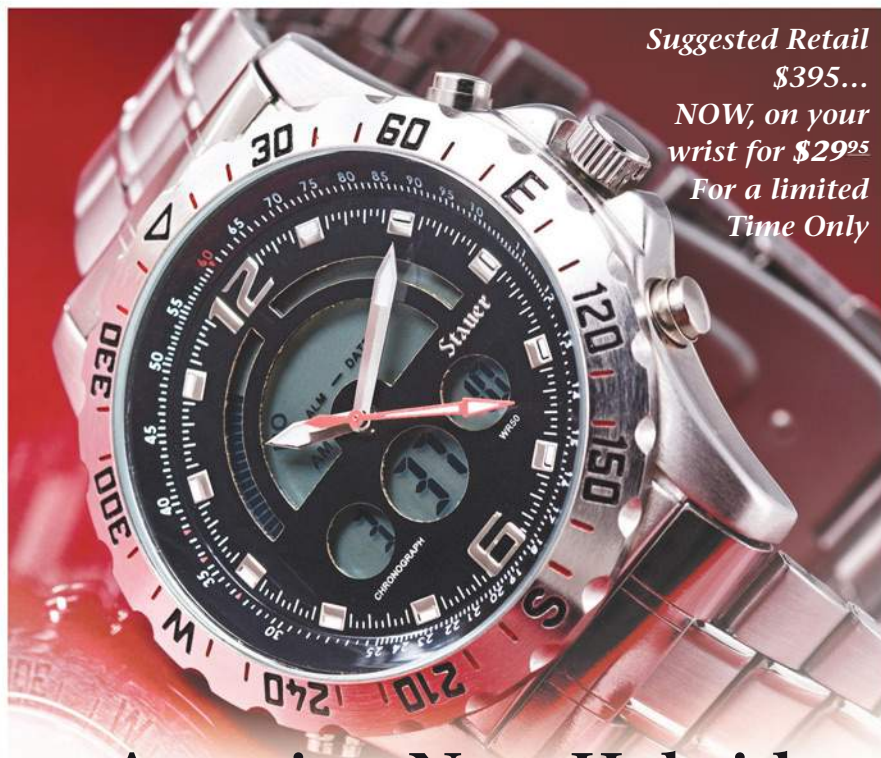


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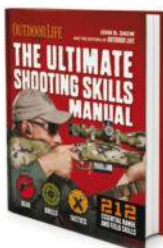


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